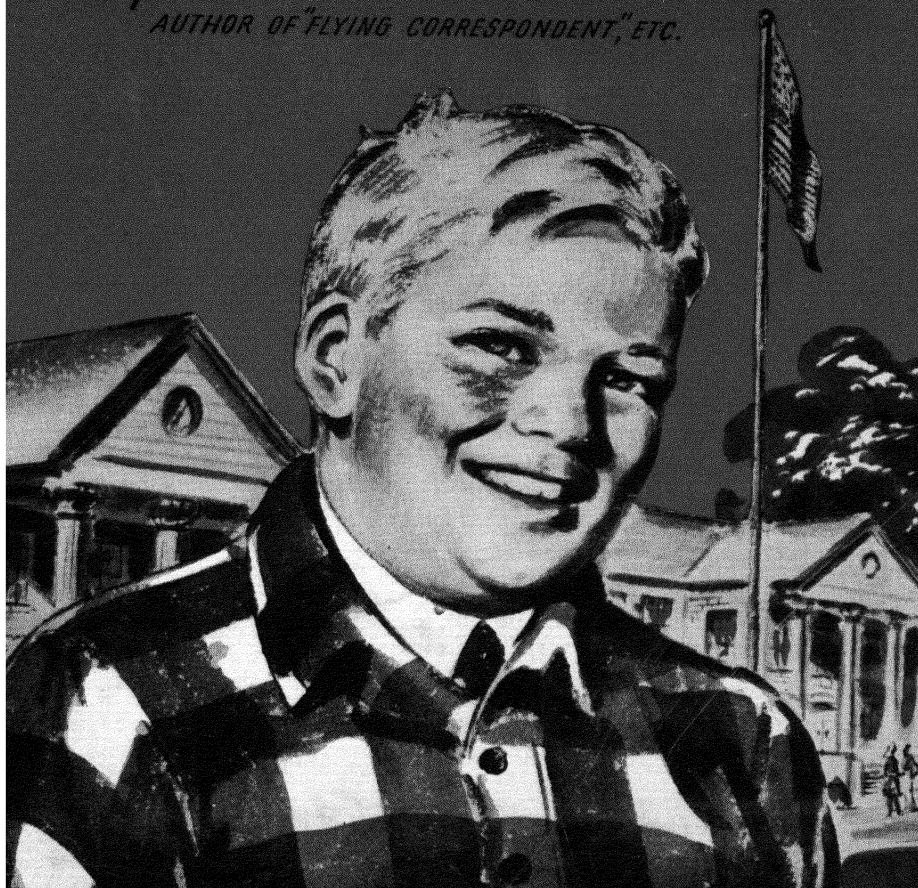


**THE TEXT IS FLY
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BERTIE COMES THROUGH

by *HENRY GREGOR FELSEN*

AUTHOR OF "FLYING CORRESPONDENT," ETC.



BERTIE COMES THROUGH

By
Henry Gregor Felsen

Author of
Bertie Takes Care

ILLUSTRATED BY JANE TOAN

Have you ever laughed at a fat boy pounding along the track, trying to win the forty-yard-dash?

Have you watched him tearing around the football field, getting in everybody's way?

Then perhaps you have seen Bertie Poddle. Bertie just didn't know the meaning of defeat. He was willing to try *anything* so long as it added to the glory of Heeble High. In the end, and almost in spite of himself, Bertie became the pride of Heeble.

Funny though his story may be, it is full of pathos, too. Bertie wins the very deep affection of every boy who meets him, for to know Bertie Poddle is to like him.



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BERTIE COMES THROUGH

Also by Henry Gregor Felsen

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SUBMARINE SAILOR

STRUGGLE IS OUR BROTHER

JUNGLE HIGHWAY

FLYING CORRESPONDENT:

A Seth Rantoul Story

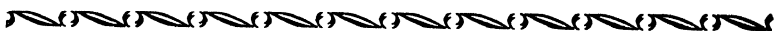
NAVY DIVER



HENRY GREGOR FELSEN



BERTIE
COMES
THROUGH



Illustrated by JANE TOAN



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Several of the chapters in this book are based on short stories which have appeared in CALLING ALL BOYS, 'TEENS, THE YOUNG CATHOLIC MESSENGER and THE BOY'S WORLD.

To

ALL THE BOYS WHO TRIED THEIR BEST

BUT COULDN'T MAKE THE TEAM



BERTIE COMES THROUGH

CHAPTER ONE

THE great annual football game between Parlow Prep and the Theodore F. Heeble High School was drawing to a grim close. With five minutes left to play, Parlow was leading by three points, and the visiting team was holding Heeble scoreless.

A tense hush settled over the crowded stands as an official's whistle blew shrilly and the public address system blared, "Time out for Heeble." The two teams, which had been battling furiously all afternoon, sank wearily to the soggy earth while the trainers ran out with buckets of water. The Heeble band bravely struck up a march, but there was little response from the discouraged fans.

Suddenly the public address system blared again. "Poddle replacing Hackenlooper at fullback for Heeble."

There was a moment of shocked silence. True enough, Wiggins Hackenlooper, the powerful Heeble fullback, was limping from the field, and the equally powerful Bertie Poddle was warming up on the sidelines. The moment of silence was followed by a storm of sound. Rolling waves of disgusted booing and catcalling greeted the name of Poddle. Excited Heeble partisans howled in angry dismay, screaming that the coach had lost his mind.

Bertie Poddle tried to shut the hostile cries from his mind as he warmed up. He didn't blame them. It was all his fault. Coach Thornton had given him his chance to start against

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Parlow. Bertie had caught the kick-off behind his own goal, fumbled, recovered, and was pinned there. Three points for Parlow — the three points that were proving enough to win the game. The coach had yanked him after that, and Wiggins Hackenlooper, the regular fullback, had taken over. He had played a great game, but Heeble had been unable to crack the Parlow defense. Now, with five minutes left to play, Coach Thornton was sending him in again.

"You know what to do, Poddle."

"I'll do it, coach."

The whistle shrilled that time was in again, and Bertie ran out to join the team, helmetless, as was his custom. He was followed by the boos and howls of his own schoolmates.

Ted Dale, the muddy, tired captain, nodded to Bertie as they took defensive positions. It was fourth down and goal to go for Parlow, and Heeble had to hold.

The ball was snapped, the players charged into action. The Parlow fullback rammed into the center of the line, where a big hole had been opened. But as he reached the line of scrimmage he was struck down as by a raging water buffalo. Parlow was held, the ball went to Heeble, and Bertie Poddle had struck back.

As Heeble went into their huddle, Poddle tersely relayed the information the coach had given him. "No more tricks. Straight football. Coach says feed the ball to me and hit 'em hard. That's all."

"To you . . . ?" They looked at him doubtfully.

"To me," Poddle said. "Coach's orders."

A moment later they were ready. The ball was snapped back to Ted Dale who whirled and placed it in the hands of Poddle, who was charging up at full speed. Bertie hit the

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line like a bull elephant, carrying half a dozen players with him as he fought forward, clawing for precious footage. Before they finally pulled him down, he had gained nine yards.

Again Bertie took the ball, and again he plunged straight ahead. There was a terrible shock as the Parlow team closed in on the raging blond tornado, but they bent back before his charge, and it was a first down.

By now the stands were screaming for Poddle, but he heard nothing. Like one possessed he carried the ball again and again, hitting straight ahead. There was no effort at deception. Parlow knew where and when he was coming through, and the entire team ganged up to stop him, but it was useless. Foot by foot, yard by yard, the powerful charges that Poddle made carried him closer to the Parlow goal, while the relentless minutes ticked away.

Slowly, oh, how slowly, Parlow gave ground as Bertie hammered the line again and again. The fans were quiet now, knowing they were seeing an exhibition of football that came once in a lifetime. The battering charges and grunts of the players were the only sounds on the churned field of battle as Bertie pounded the line time after time.

But how much could one man do? How much could human flesh stand? Even Poddle must tire, must slow down, must feel his bruises, and the effects of those terrible shocks. Even Poddle could not accomplish the impossible.

Could not? Poddle was doing it. Hammered, beaten, blinded by sweat and tears of effort, Poddle charged again and again, his whole being dedicated to one goal — to wipe out his early disgrace, and win the game for Heeble.

"This has to be it, Bertie," Ted Dale gasped. "Time for one more play, and that's all. Let's fool them and use a trick play."

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"They'll be looking for that," Poddle said tiredly. "Help me get started, and I'll meet you under the goal posts." He was not bragging. They understood the quiet confidence of his words.

Once again Bertie pulled the pigskin close to him and leaned into his charge. Knees pumping high, weight forward, head hunched between his shoulders, Bertie came straight on. He saw, through a haze, the Parlow players reaching out for him, felt the grasping of their hands, and the shock of their tackles. But he shook them off, carried them along, and with half the Parlow team dragging at his mighty legs and shoulders, he called on his great heart and strength for a final effort and fell across the Parlow goal as the gun sounded ending the game.

Bertie grinned crookedly as his teammates gathered around him and pounded him on the back. A little trickle of blood ran unnoticed down the side of his mouth. The Heeble fans were spilling out of the stands, swarming across the fields to greet their new hero, but Bertie had eyes for only one. She came running in front of the others, a vision of loveliness in her white skirt and sweater with the big blue H on it. Marcia Dale, Ted's sister, the prettiest girl in school, and the best cheer leader.

"Oh, Bertie," she cried, her lovely eyes flashing with an emotion deeper than admiration, "I knew you would do it. I knew!" And suddenly she flung her arms around the neck of her battered hero, while the Heeble fans roared their approval.

Then they were all upon him — newspaper photographers flashing pictures, radio men thrusting microphones into his hand and begging for a few words, newsreel cameramen grinding the record of his moment of triumph. Cheers swelled and

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thundered. "Yaaaaayyyy Poddle! Yaaaaayyyy Poddle!" A drum thumped in the background.

* * * * *

"Yaaayyy Poddle," Bertie whispered, sighing. The drum pounded louder, and suddenly he started from his dream and realized that someone was pounding on the bathroom door. He reached around and hurriedly turned off the shower. "Who's there?" he demanded.

"Me," a boy's voice answered. "Let me in." The voice was accompanied by a renewed pounding and kicking at the door.

"Aw, take your time," Bertie grunted, reaching for a heavy towel. "Don't rush me."

"I gotta come in." The insistent, shrill voice of his brother Bartholomew rose to a siren-like whine.

"Three more minutes," Bertie called.

Bartholomew shuffled irresolutely outside the door and went away. Bertie dried himself, wrapped the towel around his waist, and still picking at fragments of his dream, marched to the mirror to comb his hair. He looked at the mirror and a sudden feeling of terror gripped him. His heart stopped, and a startled cry gurgled in his throat. The mirror was blank! He was standing in front of the glass, looking at it, and it was blank!

Bertie opened his mouth to cry for help when the truth seeped into his brain, which was still whirling from the din of his imaginary football triumph. With an embarrassed little laugh, Bertie wiped the steam from the mirror, and sure enough, there he was.

Whenever Bertie looked at a mirror he hoped that by some

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miracle the reflection would be of a lean, dark face, strong and square of jaw, with piercing eyes, heavy brows and a noticeable, but not disfiguring knife scar, that he could be in the habit of touching with his fingers when danger threatened.

But the miracle never came to pass. The mirror always reflected the same face — the one he now regarded with disfavor. It was a round, friendly, pink-skinned face, lighted with round, bright blue eyes, and topped with tousled straw-colored hair that would never lie down. Bertie scowled at his slightly-pug nose, but though he scowled his darkest, there was nothing brooding about his expression, or any hint of hidden dark fires glowing. It came out as the nose-wrinkling irritation of a fresh-faced boy of fifteen, built on the heavy side, whose fair skin showed the clean ruddy glow of recent soap and hot water.

"Bah," Bertie said, turning away from the mirror. "Darn it." Round and pink — it was disgusting. As he dressed, he noted with disfavor his plump arms, his large legs and his smooth, rotund body. It wouldn't be so bad, being heavy, if he were built like a wrestler, with great slabs and ridges of powerful muscle rippling when he moved. But he wasn't built like a wrestler. Bertie grunted a little as he bent over to draw on a sock. Darn it, why couldn't he be long and lean — or built like a wrestler if he had to be heavy?

Bertie tied his shoes and stood up, sadly conscious of his weight, and his well-padded body. Fine chance he'd ever have of making any touchdowns for Heeble. What was the use of even trying out for the football team — for any team? He was too soft for football, too slow for basketball, too heavy for track, too . . . too everything for baseball. Darn it, he'd give anything in the world to win his H at Heeble, but there wasn't

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a chance. He hadn't made any of the freshman teams, and now that he was a sophomore, the competition was even stronger. Comic relief, that was about all he was good for. Everybody got a big laugh from his efforts. Even . . . even Marcia had laughed.

Bertie jumped as the bathroom door shivered under the impact of a heavy blow. "Bart! Cut that out! I'll break your neck!"

"Well, you let me in," Bart howled from the outside. And he swung at the door again with his baseball bat.

Bertie leaped to the door and opened it. Bart slid in grinning and triumphant. "Huh," he smirked at Bertie. "I made you let me in, didn't I?"

"I was leaving anyway," Bertie said with quiet dignity.

Batholomew sat on the edge of the tub and gazed at his big brother with a calculating eye. Bart was nine years old, and frequently a thorn in Bertie's side. Somewhere in the Poddle family tree sat an Indian, and his blood had suddenly reasserted itself in Batholomew. He was an intense, highly-charged little boy, with inky black eyes that almost crackled with life and fire. His short hair was black and straight, and stuck out defiantly in all directions. His face was pointed and alert, and the way his black eyebrows took a sudden little upward lift on the outer end, gave him the look of a little wild thing. He had a hard, lithe, active body, he was by lightning turns bold, shy, demanding, helpless and overbearing; was crafty as a witch in a cave, and more stubborn than all the mules in Missouri reckoned together.

"Well," Bertie said truculently. "What was your big rush?"

"I just wanted to be with you, Bertie," Batholomew said innocently. "I was lonely."

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"Spy on me, you mean," Bertie said, not deceived by Bart's sudden winning manner. "It won't do you any good to hang around me. This is one Saturday you are not going with me."

"I'll howl," Bart promised confidently. "I'll howl, and mama will make you take me along."

"Not today. You've ruined every other Saturday in my life, but you'll stay out of this one. I'm the only one of the bunch that can never leave the house without a little brother tagging along. That won't happen today." Bertie turned his face away to hide a grin.

"Where are you going, Bertie?" Bart pleaded. "Come on, tell me. Then I'll tell you something."

"I'm not interested," Bertie answered coldly. "Sorry."

"I'll tell you something Wilbur Frost said to Marcia Dale about you," Bart said. "Now will you take me with you?"

Bertie looked at Bart suddenly, narrowing his round blue eyes. "What did he say?"

"Will you let me go with you today?"

"Ummm — maybe."

"He said if you tried out for the football team, Coach Thornton was going to send you away, because the other players laughed so hard at you they couldn't practice."

"He said that, huh?"

"Yesterday. They were having a coke at Frubbler's."

"One man's opinion," Bertie said. "Who is he? Just because they made him sports reporter for the school paper, he thinks he's Grantland Rice." But it worried him that Wilbur seemed on such good terms with Marcia Dale.

"What are you going to do about it?" Bart asked.

"About what?"

"Wilbur's insult."

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"It's not worth thinking about. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of feeling that he could insult me."

"Why don't you knock his block off?" Bart cried enthusiastically. "You can lick him, can't you?"

"Sure, sure," Bertie assented, mentally strangling Wilbur.

"Will you do it today?" Bart asked, his face shining with eagerness.

"Do what?" Bertie shouted in annoyance.

"Knock Wilbur's block off. You said you were going to."

"I didn't say any such thing."

"You're afraid of him," Bart accused sadly. He really felt badly about it. As much as he tormented Bertie, he looked up to his older brother in some ways, and cherished a secret hope that some day Bertie would break loose and do something outstanding. A certain amount of that glory, Bart reflected, would cast its glow on him, too. He'd be known as the brother of the football hero, Bertie Poddle, or whatever Bertie did to gain fame. It pained Bart to think Bertie might shrink for a moment from a physical contest with Wilbur, or Joe Louis, or anyone else with whom friction might develop.

"I am not afraid of him," Bertie declared, his heart skipping a beat. "And he has a longer reach than I have, too. But," he added, with a sudden happy thought, "I outweigh him by too many pounds. He's not in my class. I wouldn't take advantage of my superior size and strength."

"You're just fatter than he is," Bart said, thinking the thing through in the manner of a professional match-maker. "He's as tall, and he's pretty hard, even if he is skinny. It would be a pretty even match."

"Shut up, will you?" Bertie cried hotly. "Don't try to start any fights. I'll take care of Wilbur in my own way."

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"Are you going to try out for the football team?" Bart asked.

"Of course," Bertie answered, giving his hair a couple of futile licks with a brush.

"What position are you trying for?"

"I . . . Why, I don't know for sure. Fullback, I guess."

Bart made a low whistling sound and rolled his eyes. "Fullback! *You're* going to do that? Try to take Wiggins Hackenlooper's spot? Oh my!" Bart stood up and strolled out, shaking his head and sadly humming a funeral march.

"You're not funny," Bertie shouted after him. His voice sank to a mutter. "What's so terrible about Wiggins Hackenlooper? He's just flesh and blood, and not so much more than I am, either. He's not so wonderful." But as Bertie knotted his necktie, the image of Wiggins rose before him. Wiggins with his broad shoulders, his big, powerful body and heavy head. How Wiggins could charge! Bertie remembered the games he had seen last year, and how Wiggins had hit the line. And he was going to challenge him this year. Taking the fullback job away from Wiggins was like trying to take a job away from a politician's relative.

Bertie suddenly snapped his fingers impatiently. Darn it, he'd forgotten to do his calisthenics before taking his shower. Since the start of the school year, anticipating football, Bertie had started a program to make him hard and fit the day practice opened. Calisthenics in the morning, a cold shower, road work in the afternoon, a fifty percent cut in the number of sundaes and malteds he ordinarily consumed. . . .

As a gesture, Bertie flexed his arms a few times, bent his knees about a quarter of an inch into one of the shallowest deep-knee bends in history, breathed in and out deeply twice, and called it quits. He had a fleeting twinge of conscience

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about the shower, too. It hadn't been a real cold shower. In fact, it had been quite warm. Tomorrow, positively he would take it cold. And the day was not lost. A fast walk to town would take care of the road work, and he would avoid sundaes entirely. Perhaps a small dish of plain ice cream, to keep up his strength, and that would be all.

Bertie went to his room and surveyed himself in the full-length mirror before going downstairs. He was wearing corduroy trousers, a white shirt and tie, and over the white shirt a black and white checked wool shirt that hung outside his trousers. Bertie frowned and tried to make his stomach smaller and his chest larger. He succeeded in making his face redder, and gave up. Darn it, his shirt was too tight around the middle. It didn't have that loose, careless hang that he admired. It looked so precise, and neat, and . . . snug. Why did he have to fill out his clothes so completely?

Bertie turned away from the mirror, and when he did, his figure seemed to change. Once he couldn't see exactly how he was built, it was easy to imagine that his clothes hung on him with the loose carelessness that he desired. He felt lithe and springy, and powerful.

He'd make the team, all right. He'd put everything he had into his effort. They'd be laughing on the other side of their faces before the season was out. Wilbur was having cokes with Marcia, eh? Wilbur would be glad to shake Bertie's hand when the season was over. Let him laugh now. But after the Parlow Prep game, when Wiggins wouldn't be able to play because of a broken something or other. . . .

"Bertie," Mr. Poddle said patiently. "For the third time, will you have a piece of toast?"

"Eh?" Bertie started, sat up in his chair and looked around

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vacantly. "Uh, no, thanks, I'll take these two pieces." And he smiled.

Mr. Poddle opened his mouth to say something, but checked himself. He passed the plate to Bertie and watched while Bertie helped himself to toast and went on from there to eggs, a small mountain of bacon, butter, jam, and milk. Then Bertie looked at the table, his eyes showing disappointment. "Mother," he called. "No pancakes today?"

Mr. Poddle, who had been about to taste his coffee, set the cup down with a trembling hand. "The Government," he said aloud, to no one in particular, "allows me an exemption of five hundred dollars for each dependent on my income tax returns. Five hundred dollars! This boy costs that much in bread and butter alone! What, no pancakes? You are starving me! How can I keep up my strength on half a dozen of eggs, half a pig and a gallon of milk for breakfast? Don't you know it's three long hours until lunch?"

"Now, Horace," Mrs. Poddle said soothingly. "Don't get excited. Boys are supposed to eat."

Mr. Poddle, who was rather short and heavily built, with a round face that usually wore an harassed expression, settled a pair of horn-rimmed glasses on his nose and began growling at the morning paper. Mrs. Poddle smiled at Bertie and looked pleased as Bertie made an all-out attack on the grocery positions. Bart, who sat across the table from Bertie, was busy with his cereal.

Bertie finally moved his chair carefully from the table. "May I be excused, please?"

Mr. Poddle grunted. Bertie took it to mean Yes and stood up. "I think I'll . . ."

"Mother, can I go with Bertie?" Bart yelped, sliding from

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his chair and getting between Bertie and the door. "Make him take me along, Mother."

Mrs. Poddle was about to answer when Bertie said quickly, "I won't take him." Then he winked at his mother, hoping she would go along with the scheme he had in mind.

"I'll howl," Bart threatened defiantly. "I'll howl."

"Perhaps Bertie ought to go where he wants to alone," Mrs. Poddle said to Bart. Bart stared. His mother always made Bertie take him. It couldn't be that she was taking Bertie's part. It couldn't be.

"Mother!" Bart screamed as Bertie started nonchalantly toward the door. "Daddy! I want to go aloooooonnnnnngggg!" Bart's voice rose higher and higher, until he was screeching at a shrill, ear-torturing pitch.

Mr. Poddle slammed his paper on the table. "Bart! Bartholomew! Bertram! Take him along. At once!"

Bart stopped yowling as suddenly as though he had been operated by an electric switch. "Ha ha," he chuckled, "I can go."

"Aw, Dad," Bertie protested. "I never get to . . ."

"Bertram."

"Yes?"

"Do you intend going out in public like . . . that?"

"Like what, Dad?" Bertie asked innocently.

"Unless my eyes are worse than I know they are, I believe I see you wearing a shirt which is hanging outside your trousers."

"This?" Bertie cried, touching his checked wool shirt. "This isn't a shirt. It's a jacket, kind of."

"I have been wearing both shirts and jackets for forty-two years," Mr. Poddle said severely. "And I know a shirt-tail

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when I see one. I see one now, Bertram. Yours. You will please tuck it inside your trousers before leaving the house."

"Aw, Dad," Bertie protested. "Nobody wears the shirt-tails inside any more."

"I do."

"But the fellows . . ."

"The fellows be hanged! I will not have a son of mine flying about in public with his shirt-tail hanging out like a . . . like a Russian farmer. The fellows! Suppose your precious fellows begin wearing shoes for hats. I suppose you will be forced to do the same. Be a leader, Bertram, not a follower. Rise above the slavish obedience to outrageous faddishness. When I was young . . ."

Bertie slowly began tucking his shirt inside his trousers, his face wearing an expression of sacrifice unequalled in history since Caesar's father made the young Roman discard his new toga with a belted back.

"And take Bartholomew with you," Mr. Poddle added, heaping victory on victory as Bertie gave ground.

"All right," Bertie grumbled. "Get a jacket on, Bart."

"Bertram," Mrs. Poddle said as Bart disappeared. "Don't you think your little game is cruel?"

"He's always tagging after me," Bertie said. "You always make me take him. This is one time I'll get a little revenge. Maybe next time he'll let me go by myself."

"But . . ."

They were interrupted as Bart dashed back into the room. "I'm ready," he said, flashing Bertie a look of triumph. "Where are we going? How about seeing what's playing at the movies?"

"Bart," Bertie said, loving every word. "We have other plans this morning. Special plans."

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"What are they?"

"I'm taking you — to — the — dentist."

Bart stared. He turned to his mother for some saving word, but she said, "That's right, Bart. Time for your check-up."

"No! I won't gooooo . . .!"

"Come on, little brother," Bertie said grimly, taking Bart's hand. "For once, it will be a pleasure to take you along."

CHAPTER TWO

BERTIE walked quickly toward town, bouncing a little as he attempted to take strides that were a little too long for his legs. Bart trotted beside him, pleading.

"You don't have to take me today," Bart said in his softest, friendliest way. "Let's go next week instead. Let's not go to the dentist, Bertie."

Bertie ignored the pleas. He had other things on his mind. As soon as they had turned the corner, he stopped, and carefully pulled out his shirt-tails again.

"I'll tell Daddy if you take me to the dentist," Bart said fiercely. "I'll tell him about the shirt."

Bertie turned grave blue eyes on his little brother. "A squealer, Bart? You?"

Bart couldn't resist the manly approach to his better nature. "I won't tell," he said, looking away. "But do we have to go to the dentist? Couldn't we say we'd been, and that my teeth were all right? There's nothing wrong with my teeth, Bertie. I'll show you. Ask me to bite something. Go on, ask me to bite something."

Bertie regarded the anguished face of his little brother, and a genuine pang pierced Bertie's heart. Bart was a nuisance and all that, but he was a nice kid, and when he looked at you in that trustful way, with his big dark eyes just pleading for mercy. . . .

"I promised Mother I'd take you," Bertie said, trying to soften the blow. "It's not so bad, Bart. Tell you what. We've

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got a little time yet, and I'll take you to Frubbler's, and you can have anything you want. How about that?"

"Even a cherry sundae?" Bart asked, cautiously pushing his good fortune for all it was worth.

"Even that."

"With nuts?"

"Absolutely."

"And . . . whipped cream?"

Bertie licked his lips and said, softly, "With whipped cream."

"It's a bargain," Bart said briskly. "Let's go." They headed for town again, and Bertie felt vaguely that he had been tricked, but he couldn't figure out just how.

With Bart eagerly leading the way, the brothers turned in at the sign of Frubbler the pharmacist, where the students from the Theodore F. Heeble High School went for the combinations of ice cream, crushed fruits, syrups and mixed nuts that the wizened Mr. Cyrus Frubbler mixed with lightning rapidity and unsurpassed ability. And of them all, no one more appreciated the efforts and results than did Bertie Poddle.

Bart poked Bertie in the ribs as they entered. "Look who's here," he muttered hoarsely.

Bertie had already looked, and he had seen. Seated together in a booth were Ted Dale, his best friend, Wiggins Hackenlooper, Marcia Dale, who was Ted's sister and Bertie's ideal — and Wilbur Frost. There was another girl with them whom he did not know. She had flaming red hair, and was freckled and thin.

Bertie steamed up to the booth and greeted them all with one expansive gesture. "Howdy, people."

"Hello, Bertie," they chorused. "Sit down."



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"I can only stay a minute. I'm taking Bart to the dentist."

Bart tapped Bertie on the arm. "Can I order now, Bertie?"

"Yes, go ahead."

Bart went to the soda fountain, and Bertie looked for a place to sit. The three boys were sitting together, so he slid onto the seat next to the red-headed girl. Marcia was sitting near the wall, directly across from Wilbur Frost.

"Hyacinth," Marcia said. "This is Bertie Poddle. Bertie, this is Hyacinth O'Houlihan. She's new here, and she's going to Heeble."

"Glad to meet you," Bertie said, looking at Marcia.

"You're crowding me," Hyacinth remarked.

"I'm sitting on the end of the seat," Bertie said.

"You're still crowding me."

Bertie moved back until he was almost falling off the seat. Hyacinth took no further notice of him.

"Well, Bertie," Wiggins said, "are you coming out for football practice on Monday?"

"You bet," Bertie answered, looking at the big blue H on Wiggins's chest.

"Good. What position do you think you'll try for?"

"Why . . . I don't know," Bertie admitted. "Wherever the coach thinks I might fit in."

"He's going to be fullback this year," Bart said, suddenly coming up with the sundae in his hand. "He told me so this morning."

"I did not," Bertie cried, turning red.

"Fullback!" Wilbur Frost turned mocking eyes on Bertie. "You're ambitious. Better watch out, Wiggins. This will make a good item in the Heeble Newsweek. I've been looking for something to fill the joke column."

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"I suppose *you'll* be in uniform on Monday," Bertie said cuttingly to Wilbur.

"Sorry," Wilbur replied. "I'll be too busy on the Newsweek. But I'll report your progress. I might even sell the results to Bob Hope."

"Lay off," Ted ordered Wilbur. Ted was a well-built, good-looking boy who was, on the basis of his freshman activities, already figured for a place on the team. "We need everybody." Ted turned to Bertie. "There's no reason why you can't make the team."

"Or win the Theodore F. Heeble Gold Letter, I suppose," Wilbur cut in, wanting to continue his sport with Bertie.

"What's that?" Bertie asked.

"A new award they'll start making this year. A golden H to the person who is considered the most outstanding in school athletics. They consider everything — school grades, team spirit, amount of participation, sportsmanship — all that," Ted said. "We've just heard about it. We figure Wiggins has about the best chance of winning it."

"Aw," Wiggins objected modestly, but he grinned in a pleased way.

"No reason at all why Poddle can't win it," Wilbur persisted maliciously. "Except that he won't."

"What makes you so sure, wise guy?" Bertie said hotly.

"So you think you will, eh?"

"Maybe I do."

"Ha!"

"Ha! to you."

"Go on, Bertie," Bart cried excitedly. "Sock him."

Bertie locked glances with Wilbur. The superior, mocking smile drove away his caution. Wilbur was trying to make him

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look like a fool in front of Marcia, that was it. But Bertie wasn't going to back down. "Maybe I will win it," Bertie repeated, thumping his fist on the table. "What do you think of that?"

"I suppose I can quote you to that effect in the Heeble Newsweek."

"Yes! And any place else you want to!" The words were out before Bertie knew exactly what he was saying, and then it was too late. As he sat there regretting his words, Wilbur lazily pushed his way out of the booth and said, "Next week's issue will inform the student body that simultaneously with the announcement of the establishment of the Theodore F. Heeble Golden Letter, Bertram Poddle, that 'well-known' athlete has announced his intention of winning it this year. Mr. 'Samson' Poddle will begin his career by challenging Wiggins Hackenlooper for the fullback position on the football team. Bertie, I don't know what the school would do without you. We'd sure be hard up for laughs." Wilbur laughed and walked away.

There was a long moment of silence. Hyacinth O'Houlihan twisted her skinny body until she could get a good luck at Bertie. Then she looked at Wiggins, and again at Bertie. "Poddle," Hyacinth said definitely, "you're a sucker."

Bertie blinked. "But I . . ."

"You shouldn't have let Wilbur egg you on like that, Bertie," Marcia Dale said. Bertie looked at her brown eyes and darkly golden hair and his heart spun like a top. "Couldn't you see he was trying to make you angry so you'd say something foolish?"

"Like what, Marcia?"

"What you said about the Gold Letter."

"That I'd win . . . try to win it?"

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"You know you can't, Bertie. You shouldn't . . ."

"How do you know I can't?" Bertie demanded desperately, feeling his manhood being attacked. "I haven't tried yet."

"But Bertie . . ." Marcia tried to go on, but she couldn't help laughing. "Oh Bertie, don't look so serious."

The laugh hurt. Bertie felt awkward, and ridiculous. He suddenly noticed his hand on the table, beside Wiggins's hand. His own soft, and plump, and white. Wiggins's hand broad and hard, and powerful. Bertie snatched his hand away and put it under the table. "I guess I'd better go," he mumbled, standing up. "I've got to take Bart to the dentist."

"I haven't finished eating," Bart protested from a nearby table.

"Yes you have," Bertie said with sudden anger. "Come on." He grabbed the squealing Bart by the shoulder and dragged him out to the street. "See you all later," he called to his friends, but he didn't look their way. It certainly hadn't taken him long to make a fool of himself before them all. He'd shown himself up as a big bag of wind, all right. They were probably talking about him now, and making fun of him.

Bertie's friends were talking about him, but they were not, as his tortured mind imagined, making fun of him. It was quite the opposite.

"Poor Bertie," Ted sighed, shaking his head. "He's done it again."

"It seems to me," Hyacinth said in her direct way, "that your round friend is a sucker. He led with his chin that time. What's wrong with him? Wide open spaces between the ears?"

"No," Marcia objected. "You can't judge Bertie until you know him. He's the best-hearted boy any of us know, and would do anything for his friends, or the school. Only . . ."

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"In his freshman year," Ted explained, "Bertie tried out for every team and activity in school. He didn't make one. He came in for a lot of kidding about it, but he took it like a good sport. But now Wilbur has put him in a spot, and if Bertie tries the same thing this year, he'll be the school clown. I'd hate to see that. After all, Bertie's my buddy. I don't like to see him made a fool of."

"Bertie's got the spirit all right," Wiggins said. "I'm going to see Wilbur and tell him to lay off Bertie."

"Don't let Bertie find out," Ted warned. "If he thought anyone else was fighting his battle. . . ."

"Let me handle it," Marcia said quietly. "I'll see that Wilbur doesn't write anything nasty."

"But it would be worse if Bertie found out that a girl had come to his rescue," Ted protested.

"He won't find out," Marcia said. "None of us will tell him, and Wilbur won't. He would tell if you tried, Wiggins, but he won't if I tell him not to."

"Marcia's got half the boys in school eating out of her hand," Ted explained to Hyacinth. "And Wilbur's one of them."

"You never can tell when it will help to be good-looking," Hyacinth said with a shake of her red head.

"You're not so bad-looking," Wiggins blundered. He squinted critically at Hyacinth. "You're freckles aren't so thick. If you weren't so scrawny, kind of . . ."

Wiggins was too slow to duck as Hyacinth exploded. "Scrawny, am I? I can lick you, you big ox!" She seized Wiggins by the arm and tightened her grip. "Ow!" Wiggins bellowed unashamedly as Hyacinth's wiry fingers cut into his arm. "Let go, will you? It's not polite to slug a lady."

"Then watch where you throw your insults. Next time I'll

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do my squeezing on your neck. I'll see you later, Marcia. I have to go home now."

"Wow," Wiggins groaned, rubbing his arm. "What a grip! Gosh, I didn't say anything to make her sore, did I?"

"Hyacinth is very sensitive about being so thin," Marcia told him. "She thinks all the boys are always making fun of her, and she's shy."

"Shy!" Wiggins touched his arm.

"Yes. She acts cynical and tough because she's afraid people might see that she's self-conscious about her looks. And she shouldn't be. I've seen her older sister, and she's a beauty. But she was like Hyacinth a few years ago."

"I hope Bertie doesn't make any tactless remarks to her." Ted mused hopefully. "He has enough trouble now, without taking on Hyacinth."

Bertie, meanwhile, was hurrying Bart to the dentist, wishing that Wilbur would come in to get a tooth pulled while he, Bertie, helped the dentist.

"Why didn't you sock him, Bertie?" Bart kept asking.

"Mind your own business," Bertie answered abruptly. "I'll handle it."

They turned another corner and saw Wilbur himself coming toward them. As they met, Bertie stopped. Wilbur stopped and looked at Bertie with a faint smile of derision on his face. "Well?"

"Look here, Wilbur," Bertie said heavily. "You'd better be careful what you write about me."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's so. I won't have you making a fool of me."

"Only you can do that, Bertie," Wilbur said. "I just do my duty and report it."

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"Well, you'd better be careful what you write, that's all I've got to say."

"Or what will happen . . . ?"

Bertie clenched his fists. "You'll see."

"Sock him one, Bertie," Bart said, sticking out his tongue at Wilbur. "We can lick him."

"Shut up, Bart. I'm just warning you, Wilbur. Don't try to push me too far."

"Don't be melodramatic, Poddle," Wilbur said loftily. "I suggest you wait until the paper comes out, and then we can take up anything that displeases you — any time and in any way you suggest."

Wilbur looked meaningly at Bertie and walked away.

"Aw," Bart complained, "why didn't you give him one on the chin?"

Bertie didn't answer. He was thinking of Wilbur's remark. "Only you can do that: make a fool of yourself. I just do my duty and report it."

What was he to do? Give up the idea of winning his letter? Darn it, the only way he could win his letter and be one of the school heroes was to try out for the teams. And when he tried out, and failed, time after time, he did look the fool. Well, let them laugh. He'd grin and bear it this year as he had last, and if he found his spot, it would be worth it. He wouldn't let them get his goat — but Wilbur had better be careful, that was all. He'd warned him.

Bertie and Bart took chairs in the dentist's waiting room. Bertie immediately picked up a magazine and started reading. Bart sat on the edge of his chair, nervously looking around every time there was a sudden noise. The room had the drug-smell of the dentist's profession.

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"I . . . I think the dentist is busy this morning," Bart said. "Let's not wait any more."

"He'll be through soon," Bertie answered. "And you're next."

Through the closed doors came a whirring sound and then the lusty bellow of a boy. Bart paled and looked at Bertie, but Bertie showed no sign of having heard, and never lifted his eyes from his magazine.

Softly, Bart slipped off his chair and tried to tiptoe past Bertie. Without looking up, Bertie stuck out one leg and tripped him. "Stay where you are," Bertie ordered. "You're next."

Bart shivered and returned to his chair, listening anxiously. Suddenly the door opened and a little boy came out with his mother. He was sobbing, and she was promising him a number of presents to make him forget his ordeal.

The dentist's assistant, a pretty young girl in a white uniform, came out. "Next?" she said, looking at Bertie.

"My brother, Bartholomew," Bertie said. "Come, Bart."

Bart shrank back in his chair, his black eyes narrowed and glittering.

"Come, Bart," Bertie said gently, trying to pry him from the chair.

Bart squirmed away, wrapped his arms around the chair, and tied his legs in a knot around the legs of a table. "I'm not going," he muttered.

Bertie pulled harder. The dentist's assistant gave him a hand and they both pulled. The dentist, wondering what was keeping his patient, came out, and he too reached for Bart and pulled.

"It won't hurt a bit, young man," the dentist coaxed.

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"Bartholomew!" Bertie thundered.

"Aren't you ashamed to act like that in front of a girl?" the pretty assistant said.

Bart said nothing. He glared at the three of them and took a firmer grip on the chair. He was no match for them, and soon Bart was being dragged into the dentist's office, his feet trailing, and his mouth closed like a vise.

As they dragged him past the cabinets filled with gleaming knives, hooks, pliers, absorbent cotton, burrs and so on, Bart's eyes took on a look of dread, and Bertie felt a stab of conscience about having lured his brother to this place.

As they propped Bart in the dentist's chair, Bertie leaned forward to give him comfort. "Remember," Bertie whispered, "Shakespeare said that the coward dies a thousand deaths; the brave man but one."

Bart's lips trembled and big tears came into his eyes. "I'm too young to die," he whimpered. "Even once."

"Be brave, Bart," Bertie said. "A little pain now will save you much pain later. Some day you will thank me for bringing you here."

Bart rolled his eyes in silent entreaty as the dentist pushed his head back and the nurse turned on a bright light that shone on Bart's tearful face.

Smiling, the dentist picked up some tools and advanced on Bart. "Open your mouth, young man," he said pleasantly. Both Bart and Bertie shuddered.

The dentist brought the gleaming hook close to Bart's mouth. Bart anchored his lips together with his teeth and turned his head away. The dentist let his hand fall hopelessly to his side. "It will all be over in a moment," he said to Bart.

It was over sooner than that. As the dentist relaxed, Bart

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slid down the chair, scooted between the dentist's leg, opened the window, and was half-way out to the fire escape before Bertie managed to leap after him and nab him by the ankle. "You are a disgrace to the Poddles," Bertie hissed as he pulled Bart back. "Coward!"

Just then the assistant looked at Bertie and suggested, "Bertie, why don't you show Bart how simple it is? You get in the chair, and let him see how the dentist works. Then he won't be afraid."

"I . . . I . . . My teeth are perfect," Bertie declared. His feet suddenly tingled and were drawn to the door as though by a magnet.

"All right," Bart said suddenly. "If Bertie does, I will."

"There," said the dentist. "Pop into the chair, Bertram, and we'll show Bart how it's done."

Bertie stepped gingerly forward and eased himself reluctantly into the chair. The blinding light suddenly shone in his eyes. Stiffly, he let his head go back.

"Now," the dentist said cheerfully to Bart, "this is how we proceed. Open wide, Bertie."

Bertie gave a good imitation of a yawning alligator. A moment later he felt the steel tools scratching inside his mouth.

"Ever have a toothache, Bertie?"

Bertie nodded.

"Where?"

Bertie put his finger in his mouth, pointing. "Eeuuhauuu-hahnnn."

"Ah, yes. I see it now. Take only a minute to fix it. Just a little cavity."

Bertie sat bolt upright, ready to leap from the chair. But the assistant was smiling at him, and Bart looked relaxed — too relaxed. "See how simple it is," Bertie said. "N-nothing to it."

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The dentist returned with several new tools in his hands. "Open wide, Bertie, and we'll go to work."

Bertie opened his mouth wide enough to admit one small drinking straw.

"Wider, please."

Bertie clenched his fists and opened his mouth a little wider. Wide enough for two straws.

"Wider, please. . . ."

Bertie made a supreme effort and opened all the way. A second later the dentist had his fingers in Bertie's mouth and was busy storing the Alabama cotton crop for 1947 along Bertie's gums. "Have it filled in no time," the dentist assured him, smiling.

While Bertie watched, terror-stricken, the dentist swung a little shelf under Bertie's chin and reached for his drill. He whistled a little tune as he selected a burr and fitted it to the drill. "Open wide, please. . . ."

Bertie opened his mouth and shut his eyes. He felt the drill come into his mouth, and it felt like the ones they use to cut through rocks. The burr touched his tooth, and then his head was filled with a whirring sound. Bertie couldn't help it. He let out a howl that almost cracked the plaster on the ceiling. The dentist quickly withdrew the drill. "Am I hurting you, Bertie?"

"No," Bertie mumbled, blushing. "But I thought you were going to."

The dentist laughed, and drilled again. It didn't hurt, but Bertie squirmed and gasped and groaned until it was over, the cavity had been filled, and he was allowed to rinse his mouth and step down. When he could speak again without trembling, Bertie faced Bart with a big smile. "There, see? Nothing to it.

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The only reason I howled was to give an imitation of you." Then Bertie stared as Bart got into the chair, leaned back, and opened his mouth as wide as he could — which was a respectable distance.

"Hmm, hmm," the dentist said, looking in Bart's mouth for a moment. "Perfect. Won't have to touch them."

"What?" Bertie howled in dismay. "Not even a little drilling?"

"None at all. But you had better come back next week, Bertie. You have another tooth that interests me. I may decide to extract it."

Bertie took Bart by the hand and dragged him outside. Then he started for home as quickly as he could walk. Bart trotted along beside him, humming.

"Keep quiet!" Bertie said viciously.

Bart sighed. "Some day, Bertie, you'll thank me for this. A little pain now has saved you a great deal of pain later on."

Bertie refused to answer, and kept furiously silent the rest of the way home.

CHAPTER THREE

BERTIE sat next to Ted Dale in the locker room as they put on their practice uniforms. Bertie was particularly careful of every item he put on. He made sure his shoulder pads were snug, tied his shoes tightly, and altered the length of his chin strap half a dozen times. He was nervous, and with good reason. It was the first day of football practice that called for a scrimmage. Today the Heeble first team would start to take shape. This afternoon they all would get their first chance to show what they could do against competition.

Bertie stood up, his cleats knocking hollowly on the concrete floor. He felt bulky and powerful in his uniform. "Coming, Ted?"

"In a minute, Bertie." Ted stood up and flexed his arms. Satisfied, he grinned at Bertie. "Ready for the old rough and tumble?"

"You bet," Bertie said heartily.

Wiggins Hackenlooper clumped around the corner of the lockers. He looked gigantic and invincible in his uniform. His heavy, bull-like head was unhelmeted, and there was a look of anticipation on his square face. "I've been waiting for today," Wiggins mused. "A little real action at last." He did a few deep-knee bends and then lifted his knees high as he took a couple of quick steps. "It's gonna feel good to plow into the old line again."

"It sure will," Ted echoed.

"And how," Bertie said, but not loudly.

Wiggins turned a grinning face to Bertie. "All set to fight it out for fullback?"

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"Aw, you know it's yours, but I'll give you a run for your money," Bertie said, trying to sound as though he meant it.

"Okay," Wiggins laughed with rough good-nature. "But don't get in my way when I'm coming through. I might tear a hole clear through you."

"I can take care of myself," Bertie said, trying to hide his nervousness. "You know I come through pretty fast myself, Wiggins."

They started out to the field, and Ted, walking beside Bertie, said to him in a low voice, "I wish you'd consider some other position, Bertie."

"Why?"

"You won't have a chance against Wiggins. But you might find a spot in the line. We're weak at right guard. . . ."

"Line play isn't my style," Bertie objected. "I'll try for full-back. The worst that will happen is that I'll get nosed out by Wiggins."

"I don't know," Ted said gloomily. "Wiggins likes you, but he won't pull any punches when it comes to fighting for the position. He'll be out there trying to make himself look good — that means making you look bad."

"I'll be doing the same thing," Bertie insisted, not wanting to understand what Ted was getting at.

Ted shrugged his shoulders and dropped the subject. Bertie was sensitive and stubborn, and he'd go to meet his doom that way, never admitting that he was tackling more than he could handle, and never backing up.

Coach Thornton ran his squad through the usual warm-up, and then, gathering the players around him, he chose two teams to take the field. It was obvious which team Coach Thornton regarded as the nucleus of his regular eleven. Wiggins, Ted

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Dale at quarter, the regulars left from last year's team, and the outstanding of the previous year's freshman team. Then he selected the eleven men to oppose them. When the teams were made up, they took the field, and the remaining players, Bertie among them, retired to the bench to watch and hope.

At this early moment, there was little difference between the two teams. They pushed each other back and forth, a little ragged and uneven, and showing the lack of teamwork and coordination that would come with regular practice. The second team's line was the weaker, and Wiggins was getting through it time after time, without too much trouble. Coach Thornton watched this, then blew his whistle. He sent Wiggins over to the second team, and looking back at the bench he called Bertie.

"Poddle, you're a fullback candidate, aren't you?"

"Yes sir," Bertie panted.

"Go in and take over Hackenlooper's spot on the A team."

Bertie stared, hardly believing his ears, and almost staggered on the field. Ted Dale, sweaty and smeared, greeted him with a grin. "This is your chance, Bertie," he said. "The coach will be watching."

"Don't I know it!" Bertie chuckled, rubbing his palms against his legs.

"Here's what we'll do," Ted told him. "Wiggins has been getting through on straight line plunges. With him out, they'll expect us to change our strategy, but we won't. Bertie, we'll send you right through center on the first play."

Bertie fingered his chin strap. "I . . . I'll carry the mail," he said, wondering why it was suddenly hard to talk. "I'll go through them like hot butter through a tin roof."

"We'll make a hole for you," the center grunted.

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"Remember, Bertie," Ted advised. "Knees high, and plenty of power. Give it all you've got."

Bertie was too excited to answer. He felt as though a powerful hand was gripping his stomach, twisting it. As the team came out of the huddle, and Bertie took his position, he glanced across at the other team. How big they all looked! And Wiggins, backing up the line, seemed suddenly grim.

Before Bertie had time to wonder about his immediate mission, it was upon him. The ball was snapped to Ted, and Bertie charged forward, gathering momentum as he ran. He grunted a little as Ted slammed the ball into his stomach, and folded his arms around the pigskin. As he charged forward, he was conscious of a wild confusion of straining legs, heaving shoulders, and tumbling bodies. A hole opened in the opposing line before him, and Bertie, lifting his knees high, aimed for it with an open throttle, on his way for a touchdown.

The hole into which Bertie galloped suddenly closed, as unexpectedly as the Red Sea once closed upon Pharaoh's charioteers, and with somewhat the same results. A firm hand, reaching out from the ground, gripped Bertie's right ankle while his left leg was in the air. Bertie was pulled off balance, and at that moment something akin to a low-flying P-80 struck him full in the chest, while another flying weight hit him around the knees. In another moment Bertie's head was bouncing on the hard turf like an automatic yo-yo, and then he was at the bottom of a heap of football players, all of whom seemed to be standing on his face with their football shoes.

When the tangle of players was unscrambled, Bertie found that he had been brought down by Wiggins Hackenlooper, who had also managed to take the ball from Bertie in the process. Wiggins waited placidly for the other players to get

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off before he stood up. "Nice try, Bertie," he said. "You only lost two yards on that one."

Bertie staggered back to his team, muttering several apologies.

"That's all right," Ted consoled him. "It could happen to anyone. Maybe you'll do better on defense."

"I didn't take my man out far enough," the center said. And before Bertie could say a saving word the center added, "I should have taken him out of the stadium."

Bertie bit his lip over the gibe, but went to his position without answering. He walked unsteadily, a slight haze still clouding his eyes. Every bone in his body seemed to have been loosened by Wiggins' tackle.

"Watch 'em, Bertie," Ted called.

"I'll smear 'em," Bertie growled, shaking his head to clear it.

The B team came out of the huddle, and before Bertie realized they were moving, the ball had been snapped and the two teams crashed into action. Bertie tried to follow the play, but he was lost after the first moment. He stomped the ground uncertainly and waved his arms, trying to look as though he knew what was happening. Suddenly the line in front of him was torn open, and he saw Wiggins blasting through with the fury of a starving bull elephant after a sack of hot peanuts.

"Get him, Bertie!" Ted yelled despairingly as Wiggins broke through. His desperate yell was a challenge to action.

Bertie took one last fleeting look at approaching doom, and with a great surge of courage and desperation, he ran forward and threw himself at Wiggins. He made contact with his chin against Wiggins' right knee as the knee was coming up.

When Bertie came out of the blackness, the trainer was working on him and the other players were standing around looking worried. As soon as Bertie stirred, Wiggins dropped

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down beside him. "I'm sorry, Bertie. Gosh, I tried not to hit you too hard, but you came at me head first."

Dazed though he was, Bertie's sensitivity hadn't been injured. He was aware of sudden shame that one football player was trying to apologise for being rough with another.

"It's all in the game, Wiggins," Bertie said. "Ow." His jaw ached, as it were, from head to foot. "It might have been the other way around."

"So it might," Wiggins agreed. "But somehow it never is." He shook his head as though puzzled over the fact that he always came out best in any collision with other flesh and blood.

Bertie struggled to his feet, assisted by Wiggins and Ted. He reached up and touched his chin, wincing.

"How do you feel, Poddle?" the coach asked.

"Fine," Bertie said, hoping the lie wouldn't count too much against him on Judgment Day. "Ready to go on with the game."

"I think you'd better call it quits for today," the coach advised. "No use getting hurt on the first day. Ted, take Poddle to the locker room. Daly will take your place."

Despite Bertie's mumbled protests, Ted helped him to the locker room, and sat by while Bertie painfully took off his uniform, showered, and began putting on street clothes.

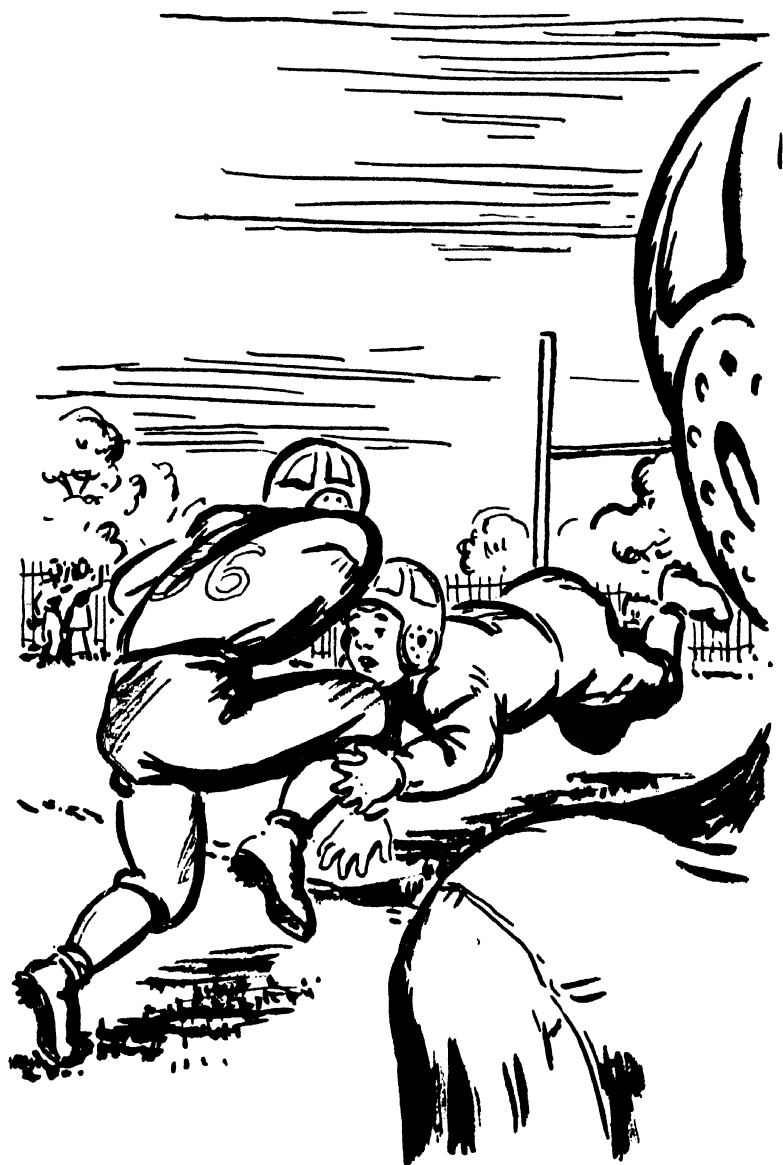
"That was quite a wallop," Ted said finally. "You can really take it, Bertie."

"Uhuh," Bertie said unenthusiastically.

"You going to think over what I said before — about trying for some other position?"

"It's fullback or nothing," Bertie stated with difficulty, his jaw stiffer with each passing moment.

"That might not be such a bad idea," Ted spoke slowly and waited.



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"What?"

"Nothing."

"You mean give up football?"

"Look Bertie," Ted said. "You know I'm your buddy, and I'm for you. If you stick with the squad, I'll do everything I can to see that you get a good break. But . . . well, maybe football isn't your sport. We can't all . . ."

"It has to be my sport," Bertie said grimly.

"Why?"

For a moment Bertie's normally round pink face looked drawn and pale. "I . . . you remember what I said to Wilbur in Frubbler's."

"Forget about that. You weren't serious when you made that crack about winning the Heeble Gold Letter, and Wilbur's forgotten about it, too."

"He hasn't forgotten," Bertie said stubbornly.

"He didn't make any cracks about it in the Newsweek, the way he said he would."

"You know why, don't you?" Bertie questioned meaningly.

"Sure . . . I mean . . . I don't know. . . ."

"I told him if he did, I'd knock his block off," said Bertie.

"That's why he didn't print anything."

Ted stared, sweating over having almost revealed to Bertie that it was Marcia's intervention that had finally won Wilbur away from his plan of running an article burlesquing Bertie. Maybe it was better if Bertie believed in his own reason. It wouldn't do to have him asking questions.

"But why do you want to go out there and get yourself knocked to pieces?" Ted asked.

"You'll see my reason on my sweater," Bertie replied.

"The Gold . . ."

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"The blue. The ordinary blue H that every regular earns. I want a letter, Ted. I'll earn it or know the reason why."

"Wiggins Hackenlooper," Ted answered. "That's one reason. I have to go back to practice, Bertie. Coming over tonight?"

"I'll be around about eight."

"Okay, see you then."

Ted clumped out and Bertie finished dressing. So Ted thought he ought to quit, eh? He wouldn't turn in his suit until they made him do it. He'd get out there every day and . . . the vision of Wiggins charging through the line arose before Bertie's eyes. He shivered. Once, he had been able to leap forward and tackle Wiggins. But what about the next time? He rubbed his sore jaw and considered the question. If football wasn't his sport, what was? He was pretty big and heavy, and there wasn't any reason why he shouldn't stay with the squad and win his letter. Not as a regular, but as a substitute. Wiggins couldn't play every minute of every game, and he could win it by taking over when Wiggins was out. It wouldn't be easy. Every day he'd be facing Wiggins across the scrimmage line, and Wiggins would be coming through again and again. . . .

Bertie gathered up his books, examined his jaw in a mirror for the last time, and started out. As he reached the door, Coach Thornton came in, still wearing a sweatshirt and a blue baseball cap. Thornton was a young, rugged coach, who had behind him an excellent record of college football. He was pleasant, but firm, and he never cut corners when he had something to say to his boys.

"Glad I found you, Poddle," Thornton said at once. "I came in to look for you."

A sudden happy thrill shook Bertie's frame. The coach himself, looking for Poddle.

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"I'm still here," Bertie said, hardly knowing what words tumbled from his lips. "I was almost gone, but I'm not."

"Sit down. . . . Bertie, isn't it?"

"That's right, Coach."

"Sit down, I want to talk to you for a few minutes. How's the chin?"

"Fine, Coach," Bertie said. He wondered what the coach had in mind. Some problem he wanted Bertie to help him with? A new play he wanted Bertie's opinion about? Perhaps a word of cheer, telling him not to be discouraged by the blow on his chin — as if he needed a word of cheer!

"Bertie," Coach Thornton said, looking Bertie in the eye, "I'll be brief. Believe me, there's nothing personal in what I have to say. But for your own good, I think it would be best if you turned in your uniform today."

Bertie stared at the coach with hurt blue eyes, unable to answer. To be on the squad for a couple of weeks and then be dropped — that happened all the time — it was the usual way. But to be asked by the coach himself, on the very first day of scrimmage . . . to have the coach go out of his way to kick you off the team. . . .

Bertie tried to answer the coach in a casual voice, saying something light and airy about looking for another sport. But when he tried to speak his dead dreams of glory choked his throat, and the visions of a moment before were suddenly melted by the tears that came from nowhere to sting his eyes.

* * * * *

For several moments there was not a sound in the locker room. Coach Thornton, his eyebrows pulled together in a

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slight frown, looked down at his shoes and toyed with the whistle that hung from his neck. Bertie turned his head away, biting his lower lip, hardly daring to breathe lest he betray himself with a sound of snuffling up tears. It was Bertie who spoke first.

"If you say so, Coach. . . . I . . . I'll turn in my uniform." Bertie took in a little more air. "B-but why?"

"I believe in being honest with my boys," Coach Thornton said, his grey eyes looking straight at Bertie. "You know, a coach is supposed to get everyone he can to try out for his team, and have as large a squad as possible. But I don't want to see you waste your time, and take a lot of punishment for nothing."

"I don't understand," Bertie said. "I don't mind getting knocked around. It's part of the game. It was an accident."

"Bertie, I've watched you since practice began. Believe me, you haven't a chance in a million of earning your letter this year. I don't want to see you put in a lot of time and effort when there's no hope. It isn't fair to you."

"No . . . hope?"

"We're strong three and four deep in every position," Thornton said. "Your chances of getting in a game are practically nil. You're just not a football man this year, Bertie."

"I'm in the way, is that it?" Bertie asked, mastering himself.

"No. You're useful enough in practice sessions, if being a live tackling dummy is all you want out of football. I'm giving it to you straight, Bertie. I don't want to see you come down day after day and work your heart out when I know that you'll never have a chance at a letter. It isn't fair."

"But couldn't I stay on the squad?" Bertie said. "Even if you don't think I have a chance? I might get better . . . and mean-

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while, if I'm not in the way, I wouldn't mind being a . . . a live tackling dummy."

Coach Thornton leaned back against the wall. "I won't throw you off the squad, Bertie. I talked to you because I wanted to give you a chance to drop out now, before you put in too many hard weeks. If I'd let you go on, and said nothing, you might feel I'd tricked you, or hadn't played fair. I wanted you to know where you stood."

"I appreciate that, Coach," Bertie said. "But I hate giving up the idea of a chance at a letter."

"But there may be some other sport that you'd be tops in, Poddle," Coach Thornton interrupted. "The year is just starting. Just because you don't make it in football doesn't mean you won't make it at all. You can stay with the squad if you want to, but if you see a chance in another sport, you take it."

Coach Thornton stood up. "You know," he said suddenly, smiling, "I know just how you feel. I've gone through it, too."

"You . . . ?"

Thornton sat down again. "Bertie, you challenged Wiggins Hackenlooper for the fullback spot. I suppose you figured that you were almost his weight, about as fast, and had just as good a chance as he to make it. Didn't you?"

"Something like that," Bertie admitted.

"I tried that once myself," Thornton said, smiling again as he remembered. "And the coach asked me to leave the squad. Only . . ." Thornton grinned, "he didn't waste words. He saw me run through one play on the field and bellowed, 'Get off the field, you hippopotamus! If I ever see you in uniform again I'll charge you rent!' That was the end of my football for that season."

"But you were . . . in college. . . ."

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"In college, yes, in high school, no. All during high school I was the funny fat boy, who was long on weight and short of breath. I didn't win a single letter in four years. But by the time I was ready for college, I'd changed. All of a sudden I'd toughened, and my weight was in the right places. I was slow getting there, and you may be, too."

Bertie nodded, but he didn't understand very well.

"Wiggins," Coach Thornton continued, "is two years older than you are, and believe me, Bertie, there's often a world of difference between fifteen and seventeen. I've seen a boy change in a single season. Wiggins developed fast, but he's at his peak. You haven't started yet. You'll change, and some day you'll be ready. How soon, I don't know. You may be like I was, and have to wait until you're in college. Maybe next fall you'll find a change has taken place, and suddenly you can do those things well which are hard for you now. You can't rush growth and development, Bertie. You have to wait. Some boys shoot up in the air all of a sudden, and are nothing but arms and legs and ribs, and are just too skinny and awkward to do anything. They have to wait until the rest of their body catches up with that growth, and then you have perfect pass receivers at end, or basketballers, and track men. You and me . . . we're the type who grow round before we grow high."

"I'd hate to wait until I was in college," Bertie said slowly.

"Maybe next year . . ." Coach Thornton said.

"But what about this year?" Bertie asked. "I want to do something this year."

"Be a live tackling dummy out there?"

"I could learn something doing that," Bertie declared. "And I'd be that much more ahead for next year . . . or the year after."

Coach Thornton stood up again. "Think it over, Bertie.

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There's no disgrace in dropping out. I won't make you leave the squad. You do what you think best. But if you stay, I want you to know what your chances are — or aren't."

Coach Thornton went out. Bertie sat on the bench for several minutes, thinking. He heard the sounds from the field where the others were being put through their paces. The shrill blast of whistles, the excited cries of the players, and the dull thud of foot against ball.

Bertie went to his locker and gathered his uniform together, counting the pieces he had to return. There was no reason to delay. He might as well turn it in now and get it over with. Slowly, piece by piece, he put the various items in a pile, preparing to pick up his dream and turn it back to the athletic department.

Suddenly there was a loud clattering of shoes and a babble of tired, excited voices. Practice was over, and the fellows were coming into the locker room. Bertie didn't want to turn in his uniform before all the others. There would be too many questions, too much explaining. His jaw was too sore for that. His mind was too tired. He stuffed his uniform back in his locker. He'd turn it in tomorrow, when they were out on the field.

When the players swarmed into the locker room, they found Bertie Poddle sitting on the bench in front of his locker waiting for them. He was smiling, and while they undressed he kidded with them about the bang on the chin he had got from Wiggins' knee.

CHAPTER FOUR

TED DALE was sprawled out on the living room couch, hands folded behind his head, his eyes tracing invisible patterns on the ceiling. His sister Marcia came into the room and sat in an easy chair across the room from him. "Bertie coming over to see you tonight?" Marcia asked.

"To see you, you mean," Ted teased lazily.

"You know Bertie considers you his best friend."

"Uhuh." Ted grinned. He turned his head so that he could see his sister. "I almost put my foot in it today."

"What happened?"

"I almost let Bertie find out that the reason Wilbur didn't write that stuff in Newsweek was because of you."

"Ted, be careful!" Marcia's brown eyes showed concern. "If Bertie found that out. . . ."

"He thinks," Ted continued, "that Wilbur didn't write it because he threatened to knock Wilbur's block off."

"I hope he doesn't find out differently."

"He will if he tries it," Ted said. "Wilbur is about the best boxer in school. I put the gloves on with him once, and he made me look silly. He has a friend he sees summers who's a professional fighter, and he's taught Wilbur a lot about it."

"Does Bertie know?"

"Do you think it would make any difference if he did? Bertie

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doesn't know how to back down. He'd handle it the hard way." Ted sat up. "Today was a good example."

"What happened today?"

"Bertie went in as fullback, and cracked his chin on Wiggins' knee. Knocked him out. Not only that, anybody could see Bertie isn't cut out for football. The coach had me talk to Bertie about leaving the squad. It didn't do any good, so the coach went down to talk to him."

"And . . . ?" Marcia leaned forward, an idea suddenly coming to her.

"I don't know. Bertie didn't say a word about it. I don't think anyone could talk Bertie into quitting."

"Maybe he could be convinced he ought to try something else."

"What else?" Ted asked. "Got any ideas?"

"I've one. . . . Here comes Bertie now. We'll see what he has to say."

Bertie's familiar step sounded on the porch, and a moment later the front door bell rang.

"Come on in!" Ted yelled, without getting up.

The door opened and closed, and Bertie came into the room. His chin looked slightly swollen, but otherwise he was his cheerful, ruddy self. His blonde hair was tousled, though it showed some signs of having been attacked with a comb and brush. His walk in the brisk night air had put a sparkle in his eyes, and a spot of healthy red on each cheek.

"How's the chin?" Ted asked.

"Okay," Bertie said, looking around for a chair. "It will be all right by the next practice session." It seemed to him his words sounded hollow and insincere, but he couldn't bring himself to tell them that he was dropping out of the squad.

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He didn't see the look that passed between Ted and Marcia.

"How are you making out on the squad, Bertie?" Marcia asked after a moment.

Bertie couldn't think of an answer that would truthfully show him in a favorable light, so he said nothing.

"Do you think you'll get the fullback spot?" Marcia asked further.

Bertie cleared his throat. "I believe Wiggins Hackenlooper will get the first nod," Bertie said with heavy seriousness. He examined his fingertips. "You know, I have been thinking it over, and wondering if football is really my sport."

"Of course it's your sport," Ted cried loyally, avoiding Marcia's eyes. He was beginning to guess what the coach had said to Bertie, and he felt badly about it.

"That may be," Bertie said. "But Coach was telling me that the team was quite strong, three and four deep, and that some of the other activities weren't so . . . ah . . . filled up. It seemed to me there might be some other sport where new talent is needed badly, and if the football team didn't really need me, I might be able to do more. . . . You understand, that little bump I got from Wiggins today isn't the cause of it. Just that I was talking with the coach, and the other sports . . ." Bertie trailed off miserably, not knowing what to say next. He was saved by Marcia.

"Bertie, I hope Coach Thornton won't be angry with me for stealing one of his players, but I know an activity that needs someone desperately."

"Yes?" Bertie brightened up at once. "Of course, if the coach says he really needs me. . . . What is it?"

"We haven't a fellow for cheer leader," Marcia continued. "You have a good strong voice, and . . ."

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"Oh," Bertie said. It was a flat, disappointed "Oh." Leading cheers for others wasn't exactly his idea of an activity.

"You could win your letter at it," Marcia urged.

"That's nice, but . . ."

"We *could* use a good masterful cheer leader," Ted said. "I'm not making any cracks about your ability, Marcia, but girls just don't have the necessary power to get the crowd going. It takes someone with more strength, and more force to take the crowd in hand, and direct it."

"Say," Bertie agreed. "That's right, isn't it?"

"You bet," Ted went on quickly. "Anybody can sit on the bench during a game, or kick a ball around. You can do that as well as the next person. But it takes a special talent to keep a whip hand over the crowd, and direct it into the kind of roaring support the team needs when the going is tough. Sometimes it makes all the difference."

"Do you really think I could do it?" Bertie asked Marcia.

"Why not?" Marcia brought her hand down firmly on the arm of her chair. "You know some of the cheers, Bertie. Try one, and we'll see how you are."

"Okay," Bertie said happily. He stood up, forgetting about his sore jaw. "How about the Heeble Crusher?"

"That's the ticket!" cried Ted. "The old Crusher!"

"Let's hear it, Bertie?" Marcia said encouragingly. "Give it everything."

Bertie bounded to the middle of the living room floor. For a moment he stood silent, setting the scene in his mind. The Heeble team on the field . . . scoreless tie . . . cold and dark . . . fans huddled in the stands without hope . . . something needed . . . Poddle's white-clad figure suddenly before them . . . the powerful voice doing wonders for team and fans. . . .

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"Here we go! Let's roll, Heeble! Show the team where we stand! It's the old Heeble Crusher . . . One . . . two . . . three . . .

"Zowie! Wowie! Rickety-rack!

Hold 'em Heeble! Throw 'em back!

Chug! Chug! Kam-a-sam AH!

Chug! Chug! Kam-a-sam-BAH!

Parlow Prep is weak and feeble

Roll to vic-to-ry old Heeble!

Zitch-a-raddle! Stitch-a-raddle!

Booley-ooley HAAAAAAHHHHH!"

Ted snatched up a sofa pillow and zig-zagged across the room. "Touchdown Heeble!"

"Bertie, you're wonderful!" Marcia approached Bertie, who still stood on the floor, his face glowing from the effort of cheering. "You're in, Bertie. We'll meet tomorrow afternoon in the stadium, and go to work."

"Tomorrow? But f-football practice . . . I don't know . . ."

"There's no practice tomorrow," Ted said. "Coach thought we ought to have a day's rest before buckling down to the grind. You could work with Marcia, and if everything works out, you can explain to Coach Thornton. If you decide against cheer leading, you won't miss any practice and can report as usual."

Bertie sat around and talked for a while, then went home. He wanted to get home early enough to brush up on some cheers, and perhaps think up a couple of new ones. No use using the same old cheers year after year if you could think up better ones. And there would be a letter in it. Not a football letter, but then, they all looked the same.

Bertie went home glowing like a firefly feeding on 100 octane nectar. At last he had found an honorable activity in

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which he could earn his letter. And more than that, Bertie reflected, touching his chin, one which would not cripple him for the best years of his life — those ahead of him. He'd be doing more than leading cheers. He'd be the master of thousands. They would yell when he gave the signal. They would be quiet and attentive when he held up his hand. It was leadership, and power. It might be his first step toward being governor — maybe president. . . .

The annual game between Parlow Prep and Heeble was being played before an audience of unusual distinction. A special train carrying the leaders of the United Nations had been halted in Heebletown, and the diplomats were taking advantage of the delay to attend the football game.

As these distinguished world leaders looked on, a trim figure in white bounded on the field and turned toward the stands. Like a conductor directing a symphony orchestra through a difficult score, the young cheer leader directed the huge crowd through a number of intricate cheers (of his own composition) with a personal power and magnetism that amazed the veteran diplomats. People were puzzled when they saw the leaders of the greatest nations on earth talking together earnestly, and wondered what great decision was being made. Little did they know that later the President of the United States himself (who also happened to be at the game) would approach the young cheer leader and inform him that the men of the United Nations had seen in him (the young cheer leader) all the qualities necessary for the man who would some day be appointed as President of the United Nations of the World. It was necessary that the young man leave Heeble and begin a special course of study and travel to fit him for the position.

The young cheer leader would accept the honor calmly, and

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asking to be excused for a moment, would step over to where a student named Wilbur Frost stared at them with ill-concealed envy and hatred. A single blow would fell Frost while the astounded diplomats commented favorably on the fistic power of their choice. Later it would be discovered that Wilbur Frost had attempted to sell the secret of the atom bomb to Parlow Prep. Then, with Marcia Dale gazing fondly at her hero, the young cheer leader, future President of the United Nations of the World, would turn to face the cheering throng. . . .

* * * * *

Bertie showed up at the stadium the next afternoon faultlessly attired in gym shoes, white trousers and a white sweater. Marcia was waiting for him, and with her was the other cheer leader — Hyacinth O'Houlihan. Both girls were dressed in denim slacks and sweaters. Bertie was acutely conscious of his gleaming whiteness, and wished he too had worn his old clothes.

"Hello, Marcia," Bertie greeted her. "You too, Hyacinth. I didn't know you were going to be a cheer leader."

"Why not?" Hyacinth demanded.

"Why . . ." Bertie stammered, not understanding Marcia's distressed signals, "I didn't think you were the type . . . would care for it."

"Why not?" Hyacinth persisted.

"Let's get started," Marcia said, trying to avoid disaster. "We're late now."

"First I want to find out *why I shouldn't be a cheer leader*," Hyacinth said with an angry shake of her red head. "What's wrong with me?"

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"Bertie didn't mean . . ."

"What did you mean, Poddle?"

"N-nothing," Bertie said, and blundered further. "I guess I didn't think you were big enough . . . need a powerful voice or something . . . and you're all right, Hyacinth, but I thought . . . you know, you're sort of scraw . . . ski . . . thin-like . . ."

Marcia shook her head sadly as Bertie fumbled along. With unerring accuracy, he had picked out the one spot where Hyacinth was sensitive, and he was rubbing it briskly with coarse sandpaper.

"I'll strangle him," Hyacinth muttered. "I'll . . . I'll . . ." She clenched her bony fists and came at Bertie, sticking out her left. "Put up your dukes, Poddle, we'll settle it right here and now."

"He-ey . . ." Bertie shouted in alarm, back-peddling quickly. "What's the big idea?"

Hyacinth shuffled forward, shaking her red head angrily. "I'll show you who's little and skinny. Put 'em up."

"I don't fight girls," Bertie stated proudly, keeping a sharp eye on Hyacinth's left.

"Bertie didn't mean anything wrong," Marcia said, putting a restraining hand on Hyacinth's arm.

"Of course I didn't," Bertie said. "Gosh, I don't mind when I'm kidded about being fat, I don't see why you mind when somebody says a word about how skinny . . ."

"Bertie!" Marcia snapped. "Keep quiet."

"Lemme go," Hyacinth growled. "Somebody hold my coat . . ."

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings," Bertie said, feeling he could prove his superior manners by being conciliatory. "Please excuse me."

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"Of course she will," Marcia said. "Now let's forget this silly squabbling and get to work."

"Okay," Hyacinth relented. "But you better watch your step, Poddle. You're at the top of my list — and I don't mean Christmas shopping."

"Let's warm up," said Marcia. "Ready, Hyacinth?"

"Ready." Hyacinth made a face at Bertie and then joined Marcia in a series of handsprings and front and back somersaults. Bertie watched with interest, and applauded heartily when they were through. "Very fine, girls. Very fine."

They thanked him, and when they had their wind back, Marcia said, "We'll try it again, the three of us."

"Fine," said Bertie. "It should look even better with the three of you . . . us . . . the *three of who?*"

"Us," Marcia said. "Are you ready to learn your tricks?"

Bertie managed a weak grin. "Can't I just sit up and beg like a dog? That's a good trick."

"This is no time for joking, Bertie," Marcia warned him severely. "Hyacinth and I are going to teach you some of the first simple routines."

"Routines . . ."

"Yes," Marcia said crisply. "Now here's the first. The three of us come running out on the field together. I'm first, you're second, and Hyacinth is third. As we run past the fifty yard line, we do a precision forward somersault, take three more steps, do a back somersault, and then three handsprings. Got it?"

"But I thought . . ." Bertie said weakly. "We just . . . cheered . . ."

"That comes later, after we've mastered the more difficult routines."

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"Come on, Marcia," Hyacinth called impatiently. "Let's get this moose between us and get started."

The two girls hemmed Bertie in, and when Marcia gave the signal they started forward at a run. It was all Bertie could do to keep up with Marcia, and he was winded when he heard her say, "Twelve more steps, and over on the thirteenth."

"Roger," Bertie gasped. Behind him, Hyacinth yelled, "Pick up your feet, Mercury."

Bertie counted the twelve, and on the thirteenth he hurled himself into the air, aimed his head at the ground, and tried to go all the way over. At the last moment before landing he couldn't resist the temptation to look up and peek, and he hit the ground with his right ear. A second later, Hyacinth's flying feet churned through the air and she landed heavily with both feet on the small of Bertie's back.

"Aaaaaooooouuuuahahahahaa . . ." Bertie gasped, spitting grass.

Hyacinth stood up, brushing off her clothes, disgusted. "You . . . you . . . boy!" she said, withering Bertie with a scornful glance.

"I must have slipped," Bertie alibied, getting to his feet.

"Try a few back somersaults," Marcia directed. "Like this." She crouched forward slightly and then arched over backward in a perfect graceful movement, landing lightly on her feet. Hyacinth, with scarcely any effort, followed suit, turning and landing lightly as a cat.

"Now you try, Bertie," Marcia said. "And we'll see if you have any faults."

Bertie crouched and jumped, flinging himself backward, clawing with his hands. He closed his eyes as he saw the ground

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rushing up at him, and then there was a sound like that of a truck hitting an empty orange crate.

When Bertie staggered to his feet, his head was twisted, and he couldn't straighten it. Both Marcia and Hyacinth had to tug and turn his head until it snapped back to normal. Bertie kept muttering to himself, "You can do anything a girl can, Bertie. You can do anything a girl . . . you've got to! You must!"

"Now," Marcia said cheerfully, "we'll try the handsprings. Like this, Bertie." She and Hyacinth did a few, to show him how easy it was. Bertie felt cheered. At least it was legal to use hands on this one.

The three of them got in line, broke into a short run, and at Marcia's signal they went into the handspring. Bertie got half-way over perfectly, and then something buckled, and his face was in the turf, and Hyacinth was beating a tattoo on the back of his head with her heels.

"You saboteur!" Hyacinth shouted angrily. "I'll . . . I'll . . ." She advanced on the dazed Bertie with her fists up, and Bertie, his head swimming, prepared to defend himself by leading with his right.

The practice continued for an hour, with Bertie grimly refusing to quit. When the session was over he could hardly stand. As he limped home he could swear that he could hear the loose ends of bones grating against one another. His formerly immaculate white clothes looked as though he had spent an hour in an automatic washing machine trying to give a wild-cat a bath. It was hard to tell where the pieces left off and the Puddle began.

When Bertie entered the house, his father was in the living

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room. Mr. Poddle looked sharply at Bertie. "What's the matter, Bertie? Have you been fighting?"

Bertie sat down slowly. "No. I've been trying out as a cheer-leader."

His father looked at him over the top of his glasses. "I thought you were going out for the football team."

"I was," Bertie said tiredly. "But this chance came up. . . . They said they needed a boy cheer leader, and I thought . . ."

"Having a hard time with football?"

Bertie nodded, avoiding his father's glance. "I guess it just isn't my sport," Bertie said.

"Not much chance of winning your letter?"

Bertie shook his head.

"What does that matter?" his father said suddenly. "Is that all you're looking for? Is that all it means to you?"

Bertie looked at his father silently.

"Look here, Bertie," Mr. Poddle said, taking off his glasses and putting them carefully on the table beside him. "What's the important thing about a team?"

"That it plays, I suppose," Bertie said tiredly.

"Win or lose, right?"

"Y-yes."

"And the important thing about trying out for a team is that you stick with it, win or lose. Not everybody can win a letter, Bertie. Just like — well, not everybody in the war won a medal. The medal and letter winners are in the minority. But they wouldn't be able to win, and there wouldn't be any army — or team — if it weren't for the fellows who do their part just as well, and work just as hard, but never win anything for themselves. What I'm trying to say is, that when we won the war, it was a victory for everybody on our side, and

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not just the heroes and medal winners. And victory meant just as much to all the unknowns. In your case, what's the important thing? Isn't it that Heeble has a team, win or lose, and everyone does his best?"

"I . . . I guess so," Bertie said. "But I don't have much of a chance to do anything."

"Do you mean you're absolutely worthless on the football field?"

"No," Bertie said, reddening. "But I've been told that all I can expect to be is a live tackling dummy."

"Can they use live tackling dummies?"

"I suppose so."

"Then be one." Mr. Poddle put his glasses on again, and stared at Bertie. "I would like to see you win a letter, Bertie," he said kindly. "It would give me a great deal of satisfaction. But it would also give me as much satisfaction to know that my son had real spirit — not the spirit that comes from winning a letter, and personal glory, but the kind of team and school spirit that keeps him working just as hard as anyone else on the squad, even though he knows he's just a — a live tackling dummy. Do your job, Bertie, and you'll know that your sweat and effort is in every Heeble victory. There wouldn't be any victories over other teams if there weren't scrub teams to work with throughout the week. The crowd might not know what you've done to help the team to victory, but the team knows, and the coach knows, and more important than all — you know. It's easy to get in there and fight when the crowd is watching, Bertie. Anybody can do that. But the real test of a man is whether he can fight just as hard alone, without any cheers, because his feeling for the school is stronger than his personal ambitions."

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"Gosh, Dad," Bertie said wonderingly. "You never spoke to me like this before. I've thought about the things you said, but I . . . I didn't think you'd . . . understand."

Mr. Poddle reached for his newspaper. "I know you won't believe this," he said gruffly. "But once upon a time I was young myself, and went to high school." He pulled his glasses off again. "See this?" he demanded, pointing to a small scar over his right eye. "Football injury. Not the kind of football you play today, but the way it was played thirty years ago. It was really tough then. I was just a little fellow, but I wanted to play football. . . ."

Bertie leaned back and listened to his father. Not dutifully, as he had often done before, but with a genuine interest, and not without some curiosity. His father was . . . well, he was darn near . . . he was really human after all!



The next afternoon, as Bertie was hobbling down the school steps, Marcia caught up with him. "We've found another girl who wants to be cheer leader," Marcia said. "You won't be mad if I don't ask you to stay with us, will you?"

"Well . . . no," Bertie answered, trying to hide his elation. All day he had been wondering how he could tell Marcia he wanted to drop cheer leading, and not have her think badly of him.

"Don't be too down-hearted," Marcia said, still trying to find a spot for Bertie. "I have another activity in mind for you."

Bertie shrank back against the wall, wondering how long he would be in the hospital.

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"They're starting a chess and checkers team," Marcia went on. "Would you . . ."

"I'm pretty good at those games," Bertie said, trying to please her. "Really I am."

"Fine! They meet in Room 203. Report there to Hyacinth O'Houlihan. She's the captain."

Bertie sighed and started walking away from the school building.

"Bertie," Marcia called. "Where are you going?"

Bertie paused for a moment. "To football practice," he said slowly. "I'm going to try to beat out Wiggins Hackenlooper for the job of fullback. After all, I want a fighting chance to survive."

Bertie was the last one to come in the locker room. He changed clothes quickly and went out toward the field. As he came out, Coach Thornton saw him, frowned, and then smiled. That smile gave Bertie one of the best moments of his life. His Dad had been right. The coach would understand.

"Say Bertie," a voice said behind him, "I thought you'd given up football."

Bertie turned to face Wilbur Frost who was regarding him with a faint smile of mockery. "I saw you trying to be a cheer leader yesterday," Wilbur continued, and grinned.

"I'm on the squad," Bertie said. "And I'm staying on."

Wilbur shook his head. "Boy, you are thick. Don't you know you haven't a chance in a million to win your blue letter — let alone the Gold?"

"I know that," Bertie assented steadily.

"Then why are you hanging around?"

"You wouldn't understand," Bertie said with strange calmness inside him. "You wouldn't understand at all."

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Bertie turned and walked away. Wilbur stood looking after him with a little puzzled frown. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned his attention to the practice session, gathering material for his sports column in the school paper.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS SUNDAY afternoon, and Bertie Poddle's behavior was strange and mysterious — even for him.

Bertie tiptoed from his room to the head of the stairs and looked below. His father (as usual) was sleeping in the rocking chair by the radio, surrounded by a disarray of discarded newspapers. The radio gave forth with a low violin moan, which was lost among the snores, regular and sonorous, given off by Mr. Poddle. A rattle of dishes from the kitchen told Bertie where his mother was. Bart was nowhere to be seen.

Breathing heavily, and with a conspiratorial air about him, Bertie tiptoed back to his room, softly opened the window, and tossed his new finger-tip reversible coat to the ground below. This was followed by his new red ear muffs, and his gloves. Then he closed the window, very softly, and let out a great breath, to relieve the tension.

Getting a new grip on himself, Bertie went quietly to the stairway again, slipped off his shoes and started down, easing his weight from step to step, grimacing madly when the boards squeaked, and standing rigid whenever there was a sudden, unexpected noise.

He reached the bottom of the stairway in safety, paused, trembling, and moved forward again. A sudden loud pizzicato

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from the radio violinist caused Mr. Poddle to snort protestingly in his sleep, and then he subsided. With his heart beating faster, Bertie moved forward again until he reached the front door.

A grin of triumph curled Bertie's lips as he softly opened the door and backed out. He closed the door after him, silently, and bent to put his shoes on again. Then he straightened up, the flush of victory coming unchecked to his features.

"Where you going, Bertie?"

Bertie leaped as though he had been stabbed with a hat-pin. "No!" he cried desperately, whirling around. "No, no, a thousand, million million times no! You can't go. . . . What are you doing out here, Bart?"

Bart's dark, intense face relaxed in a big smile. "Waiting for you, Bertie. Where are you going?"

"What made you think I was going anywhere?" Bertie asked, his wide blue eyes the picture of innocence. "I just came out for a breath of air."

"Then why," Bart continued relentlessly, "did you throw your coat out of the window?"

"You — you saw?"

"I was watching," Bart said grimly.

Bertie strode angrily to the rear of the house, put on his coat, ear-muffs and gloves. "All right," he said belligerently. "I am going some-place. But I'm not taking you."

"I want to go along," Bart said doggedly. "I want to go."

"No." Bertie said. "For once I'm going alone."

Bart's lower lip began a familiar trembling. Bertie turned away, and a moment later a shrill, siren-like sound disturbed the quiet of the afternoon.

A window opened suddenly and Mrs. Poddle looked out.

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"What's going on out there?" she demanded. "Bertie, what are you doing to Bart?"

"Nothing," Bertie said sullenly. "I just tried to go away without him — for once."

"Where are you going?"

"Just . . . around," Bertie said. "Just for a little walk."

"Then take him along. It won't hurt you, and it will give us all a little peace."

"But I . . ." Bertie protested. He was cut short by a new howl from Bart. A rasping, throat-destroying howl, delivered with his eyes squeezed shut, his face purple, and his fists beating the air.

"Oh, all right, all right!" Bertie shouted. "Come on then, you little pest."

The words weren't out of Bertie's mouth long enough for the November air to cool them before Bart had stopped howling, had opened his eyes, and was smiling happily.

"Be a good boy," Mrs. Poddle said to Bart. "Do what Bertie tells you to, and don't cause him any trouble."

"I'll be good, Mama," Bart promised dutifully, but he gave Bertie a wicked, I-won't-be-tamed-by-you grin.

Bertie adjusted his ear muffs and started off. Bart trotted alongside, looking happy.

"Why do you always want to tag along with me?" Bertie demanded. "Haven't you any friends of your own?"

"I like to be with you, Bertie," Bart said. "That's all."

Bertie's reluctance to have Bart along was softened by the frank statement. "We're going to do something a little unusual this afternoon," Bertie said to Bart. "It calls for quickness, and courage. You'll have to keep your wits about you if it's going to work."

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"What are we going to do?"

"You'll see when we get there," Bertie answered shortly, and Bart kept silent.

A few minutes later Bertie, annoyed that Bart hadn't questioned him further, said, "We're going to the football stadium, Bart. There's a big game on today between two professional teams."

Bart broke out his biggest smile. "I like football," he said enthusiastically. "Where are we going to sit?"

"I . . . I haven't decided yet," Bertie answered vaguely. "We'll worry about that when we get there. Come on," he said, pulling at Bart. "Don't dawdle. We're late now."

"I just wanted to pet that dog," Bart said. "What are we going this way for? It's not the way to the stadium."

"You'll go my way or you can go home," Bertie flared.

"You're taking the long way," Bart complained. "I know why, too. You want to go past Marcia Dale's house."

"If I want to see *Ted* Dale, I guess that's my affair," Bertie replied loftily. "I want to ask him about a new off-tackle play I worked out the other day."

"Um," Bart said, unconvinced. "The football season is almost over, Bertie," he continued. "Isn't the coach ever going to let you in a game?"

"The coach knows what he's doing," Bertie answered. "I don't feel I ought to tell him how to run the team."

"But you won't win your letter," Bart shrilled, as though he were telling Bertie something new.

"So what? I'll win it next year."

"I don't see why you hang around when they won't let you play in a game," Bart said. "I wouldn't. I'd let them have their old football team."

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"You don't understand, Bart." Bertie felt just a little like a movie hero accused of being a spy, and sworn not to reveal his identity. "Some day you will understand. It's something bigger than winning a letter. It's a matter of school spirit. Either you have spirit or you don't, and if you have it, personal reward doesn't matter. If you haven't got it, you can be the best player on the field, but you won't . . . you won't . . ."

"Win a letter?"

"No, you'll win a letter, but something is missing. And if you have school spirit, it doesn't matter."

Bart shook his head dubiously. "Bertie," he said wisely. "I think you were played for a sucker."

"If you think that, you can go home right now," Bertie raged. "If I'm such a sucker, why do you want to be seen with me? Go home! Go home!"

"I'm probably wrong," Bart cried with the air of having made a great discovery. "You said I wasn't old enough to understand. It's not my fault, Bertie."

"All right, but this is the last time."

"I was thinking about you," Bart said. "If you don't get in a game, Wilbur Frost might write something mean about you in the school paper."

"Oh, I guess not," Bertie said confidently. "He was going to make some cracks about my trying for the Gold Letter, but he never did. Remember that day we went to the dentist, and I told him off? He didn't print anything after that. Wilbur knows when he's well off."

"What would you have done, Bertie?" Bart cried admiringly.

Bertie went into a crouch and pawed at the air. "The old one-two," Bertie puffed, pawing heavily at the air. "A stiff left to the jaw like this . . . and a hard right cross. Like th-uhn-is,

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and there lies Wilbur Frost, wishing he had never started anything."

"I didn't know you could box," observed Bart. "Are you good at it?"

Bertie looked around. "I got a book out of the library that tells all about scientific boxing," he confessed in a low voice. "With pictures and everything. I've been studying it." And Bertie assumed a crouch once again, and struck several telling blows at the wind.

"Gosh! Will you teach me how?"

"Of course. Every young fellow ought to know how to box scientifically, so he can protect himself."

"From what?" Bart asked practically.

"From . . . from danger, of course," Bertie said, annoyed. And seeing a certain house come in sight, he adjusted his ear muffs, straightened his coat, and forgot about Bart.

As Bertie dawdled toward the certain white frame house, with Bart running ahead, urging speed, the door of the house opened and Ted and Marcia Dale came out. "Hi!" Bertie yelled, and for Bart's benefit he added, "Ted."

"Hello, Bertie," they answered, waiting for him to come up. "What's new?"

"I'm taking the beast out for an airing," Bertie said, nodding toward Bart, who was swinging on the front gate. "As usual."

They talked for a few minutes about this and that, and then, "Going out for anything after football is over?" Ted asked.

"Sure," answered Bertie. "But I don't know what. Basketball isn't my game, so I suppose I'll have to wait until spring for baseball."

"Track is out, huh?"

"I'm no sprinter. That's for the string beans. Wish we had

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a swimming team, though. But by the time they build a pool, I'll be in college."

"Say," Ted cried suddenly, "there'll be a new activity this winter: a boxing team."

"Yes," Bertie sighed. "If they only had a pool, I'd sure go out for that swimming team, if they started one."

"Boxing team?" Marcia said. "That sounds interesting. What do you think of it, Bertie?"

"The Australian crawl is my best stroke," Bertie continued. "I'm really at home in the water. I'd sure like to see a swimming team."

Bart had come up to them in time to hear Marcia's words. "Say," Bart put in proudly, afraid his big brother might not be fully appreciated, "Bertie knows all about boxing, don't you, Bertie?"

"N-not all about it," Bertie mumbled, grinning sheepishly. "Only a little."

Bart could not understand Bertie's attitude. It bothered him that Bertie had failed at football, and he was eager to see his big brother appear as a champion. And taking Bertie's past statements at their face value, Bart furthered Bertie's claims to fistic ability.

"Bertie knows a lot about boxing," Bart insisted. "He's been studying it. In a book."

"Have you?" Marcia asked Bertie. "Don't be modest with us."

"Oh, a little," he admitted. "The fundamentals . . ."

"Good! Try out for the team." Marcia beamed at him. "It's a new one, and it needs support. It might be your sport, Bertie."

"It might," Bertie said, but he couldn't put any enthusiasm in his voice.

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"That's the spirit!" Marcia patted his sleeve. "I wish everyone in the school had your spirit."

Bertie blushed, and looked at the ground, his heart pounding. At the moment he was ready to challenge Louis, Conn, Dempsey, Firpo and John L. Sullivan, one after the other.

"You'll have to beat only one fellow to make it," Ted said.

"Who's that?" Bertie asked carelessly, mentally tabbing Louis with a hard right, and winning the world championship.

"Wiggins Hackenlooper."

"That's nice." Bertie laughed hollowly. "After winn . . . Wiggins?" He looked at Ted with pleading eyes.

Ted nodded sadly. "Wiggins," he said. "He was the first to sign up. There have been plenty of people for the other weight classes, but you're the first one to challenge Wiggins for his spot."

"Isn't it fine you've been studying boxing?" Marcia smiled at Bertie. "Did you know there was going to be a boxing team?"

"I had someone . . . something else in mind," Bertie explained lamely, wanting to strangle Bart.

"I'll be cheering for you, Bertie," Marcia promised, and Bertie was positive she was looking at him fondly.

"I'll be there," Bertie said, as Ted rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I'll make Wiggins fight for his place on the team."

"And he's just the guy who can do it," sighed Ted. "We have to go now, Bertie. I'll see you around — for a while, I guess."

"So long," Bertie called after them. He stood looking at Marcia as she walked away with Ted. She sure was pretty, but she certainly got funny ideas about what he ought to do for the school. Suddenly he swung angrily on Bart. "Look here," he exploded, "the next time I want you to talk about my private

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affairs, I'll let you know. Until then, just keep them to yourself."

"But you told me . . ."

"You didn't have to tell anyone else."

"Don't you want to try for the boxing team?"

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't. That's my affair."

"I didn't tell you to," Bart cried. "Marcia was the one who talked you into it. If you didn't want to do it, why didn't you tell her?"

"You wouldn't understand," Bertie told him, falling back on his stock excuse when he couldn't meet Bart's arguments.

"Golly," Bart complained, "I don't see why you let a girl make you do things you don't want to."

"It's a matter of chivalry," the older boy said doggedly. "A gentleman does not refuse a lady's request."

"You don't do a lot of things Mama asks you to."

"I won't even discuss it with you," Bertie shouted. "You wouldn't understand!" And he rushed Bart along toward the stadium so fast his little brother had no breath left for further questions and argument.

When the brothers reached the stadium, a great crowd of people was milling outside the gates. The air was filled with shouts and laughter as the people inched slowly forward, carrying blankets and portable radios, field-glasses and the other necessary equipment for watching a football game. Inside the stadium a band was playing, and its cheerful, exciting music made a perfect background of sound for the colorful crowd streaming in. Bertie felt his pulse quicken with excitement, and Bart was hopping up and down.

"Come on," Bart yelled, pulling hard at Bertie. "Let's go in. Let's get in before they start." He strained forward, his eyes shining.

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"Ah . . . not so fast, Bart," Bertie cautioned, trying to sound casual. "We need a plan."

"What for? Get your tickets out, Bertie, and let's go in."

"We need a plan," Bertie said, "because we don't have any tickets. And I've only got a dime in money."

Bart turned misty, unhappy eyes on Bertie. His lower lip began trembling as his disappointment choked up in his throat and threatened to spill out. "You said you were taking me," he said in a thin voice. "I th-thought we w-were g-going in. . . ."

"Now don't start bawling," Bertie said roughly, trying to cover up his sympathy with Bart's sorrow. "You howled to come along, and you have to take the bitter with the sweet. We don't have tickets, but that doesn't mean we won't get to see the game."

Bart looked hopeful. "Do you know something, Bertie? Some way they'll let us in . . . ?"

Bertie took Bart to one side and addressed him in a low tone. "Bart, if we want to see this game, it's a matter of guerrilla operations, understand? Catch as catch can; all's fair in football."

Bart frowned. "I don't understand, Bertie."

"To put it brutally, Bart, we've got to figure out some way to crash the gate."

Bart's eyes widened. "You mean — sneak in?"

"Crash the gate," Bertie repeated. "One way or another. Are you with me?"

"No," Bart said suddenly. "I don't want to do it. It's not honest. It's the same as stealing."

Bertie gave his little brother a look of scorn and disgust. "All right," he blustered. "Be a namby-pamby and a goody-goody. See how many games you get in to that way. Same as stealing . . .

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bosh! Boys have always crashed the gate to see circuses and ball games. It's their historical right. Read history, Bart. See how many great men of today got their start in life by lifting the corner of a circus tent and going in when no one was looking. It's all there in writing."

"I won't do it," Bart said stubbornly. "Our Sunday school class promised last week not to sneak in places."

"All right, then," Bertie said. "You don't have to. But don't come around later and ask me what the game was like, because I won't tell you. You made me drag you all the way here, and I won't give up. You can just wait for me under this tree, and I'll meet you after the game."

"I'll wait," Bart said placidly. "I'll be right here."

"So long, Bart," Bertie said, turning up the collar of his coat. "The Shadow strikes again."

Bertie stalked away, feeling a delicious sense of freedom now that he was free of Bart, and able to work on his own. A lone wolf, that's what he was, and he liked to play his hand alone.

Bertie mingled with the people who were pushing and shoving to get into the stadium. His eyes skipped over the crowd, looking for a likely prospect. At last he saw a man who suited him, and Bertie eased toward him. He chose a stout, happy man who had an unlighted cigar clenched in his teeth, and who was motioning with a hand filled with tickets for a number of friends to follow him. Bertie drifted over to this man, and when he was by the man's side, he too turned, and laughed and beckoned, and hung so close that the man almost stumbled over him.

Playing his part for all he was worth, Bertie went up to the gate with the strange man, standing close, looking at him as

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he talked, and smiling and nodding at his words, as though he was the one being talked to. When the big man went through the turnstile, Bertie was right behind him, studiously avoiding looking at the ticket collector, and trying to act the gay member of a gay football party.

A large, firm hand suddenly reached out and seized Bertie by the collar. Turning, he looked into the scowling face of a policeman.

"Where's your ticket?" the policeman demanded.

"I'm with him," Bertie yelped, pointing toward the stout man, who was almost out of sight. "He's . . . he's my father."

"And he's my landlord," the policeman said. "And I happen to know that all his children are girls. Which one are you?"

"I . . . I . . . Is that so?" Bertie said, trying to show surprise.

"Yes, that's so. Now look here, boy, I'm tired of the way you lads are always trying to sneak into these games. The next one I catch, I'll make an example of him. So don't let me catch you trying this trick again. Understand?"

"Yes sir," Bertie said humbly.

"Get goin', then."

The policeman relaxed his grip on Bertie's collar and Bertie scooted out of sight, slightly shaken. But the band inside the stadium struck up another march, and he heard the sound of a football being kicked, and it stirred his desire to see the game. Setting his jaw in a grim bite, Bertie pushed his way around to a back entrance, near the rear of the stadium, where the players went in. He strolled up to the gate and very casually went through, nodding pleasantly to the guard. The guard barred his progress with a thick arm. "Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

"I'm going in to see my friend, "Pug" Pompadier," Bertie

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said innocently. "He wanted me to come and see him play today, and told me to come in this way. He said he would leave word at the gate to let me in."

"He left no such word," the guard said. "And besides, he's not playing today. He broke his leg in practice four days ago. So you can't come in. Besides, that's such an old trick it's got white whiskers. Who are you tryin' to kid? On your way, boy. On your way."

Bertie walked away shaking his head. Things were certainly going badly for him today. It was hopeless to think of getting in now. The best thing to do would be to pick up Bart and go home. Bertie had a dime in his pocket, and he decided to spend it on himself and Bart down at Frubbler's. They could listen to the game over the radio, and be comfortable at home. He'd tell Bart — and it would be the truth — that he had just wanted to see if it could be done, so he could report it to the newspaper, or something.

Bertie returned to the tree where he had left Bart, but there was no sign of his little brother. Bertie waited a few minutes, looking around, and several times he called Bart's name. But there was no sign of him. As he waited, Bertie began to worry. Maybe Bart had gone home alone. If he had, Bertie would catch it when he got home. He wasn't supposed to let Bart wander about by himself.

Maybe Bart had started for home and had been run over, or had some other accident. If that happened, it would be his fault, Bertie worried. He shouldn't have left Bart alone. Bertie paced back and forth under the tree imagining all the horrible things that might have happened.

The last of the crowd went into the stadium. The game started. Still, no sign of Bart. Bertie looked around and saw

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a man who had been selling pennants and footballs. The man was sitting on the curb, counting his money.

"Excuse me," Bertie said, approaching the man. "Did you notice a little boy who was standing near here all by himself? He was about nine years old, with no front teeth, black eyes, and he had on a tan snow suit with a fur collar and a knitted brown cap that buttoned under his chin . . . ?"

"Yeah," the man said. "Saw a kid like that go in the main gate about ten minutes ago."

"Thank you," Bertie said. "Thank you." Forgetting everything else, he ran to the main gate. As he pounded up to the turnstile, the policeman stopped him again. "Now where are you going?" the policeman demanded. "I thought I told you . . ."

"I'm looking for my little brother," Bertie panted. "He's lost, and a man said he saw him come in here. . . ."

"That's the last straw," the policeman said wrathfully. "I've heard all kinds of lies from boys trying to sneak in games, but this is the blackest of them all. What an idea! I'll make an example out of you, young fellow, and teach you to be truthful. Now, you can either march on down to the jailhouse with me, or start cleaning up the paper and peanut shells and such littering up the sidewalk here. What's your choice?"

"But my brother," Bertie pleaded. "What about Bart . . . ?"

"Take your choice," the policeman said relentlessly. "I don't know but what I ought to take you to the station at that. You look like the criminal type, lad. Where were you when the Heeble National Bank was held up?"

Bertie paled. "W-when did that happen?"

"Don't act so innocent. In 1937."

"I was in kindergarten," Bertie whispered.

"That's your story," the policeman said. "Now, get that

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push-broom in the corner and start sweeping, or we'll be making a little trip together."

Bertie gave up trying to explain about Bart. He took the broom and started cleaning up in front of the stadium. He could hear the noise that attended a thrilling, hard-fought game, the cheers, the music, and the groans, but he dared not look up from his work, for the policeman kept a grim eye on him. Sick with worry over Bart, Bertie swept and swept, until the streets shone with cleanliness.

At last he thought he had done a good enough job to call it quits. He started back toward the policeman, carrying the broom, when a shot was fired inside the stadium. The game was over. Bertie stood to one side, stricken, as the mob came hurrying out scattering a mass of papers, programs, peanut shells and assorted junk all over his nice clean sidewalk.

Bertie looked anxiously for Bart, but there was no sign of him. The crowd thinned and the last people went away. Still no Bart. Bertie wondered what he would say when he returned home with the news that Bart was lost.

Suddenly a voice behind him made Bertie jump, but joyfully. "Where did you go, Bertie? Were you lost?"

Bertie turned. Bart was standing before him, his cheeks glowing red from the chill wind, his eyes gleaming with happiness. "Wasn't that some game?" Bart shouted. "What did you think of that last pass? Wasn't it a beauty? Where were you sitting?"

"To tell the truth," Bertie said, "I didn't go in. I got to talking with the policeman here, and . . . But how did you manage to get in?"

"It was simple," Bart said. "I went up to the gate and told them I would like to see the game, but I didn't have any money, and was there any work I could do inside to earn my way in.

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The man who hires the salesman for hot dogs and peanuts was there, and he heard me, and said he could use me."

"Go on," Bertie said wearily, leaning on his broom.

"Well," Bart continued excitedly, "I was too little to carry the baskets, but when people bought things, I was just the right size to make deliveries along the rows, without getting in anyone's way, or disturbing anyone. It worked so well, the man said I could have the same job for all the rest of the games, and I get all I want to eat, too. Isn't that wonderful? What did you do, Bertie?"

"As I started to say," Bertie said gravely, "I was talking with the policeman, and we noticed how dirty the street was, and we thought it was a disgrace to the city, and my civic pride was offended. Well, I forgot all about the game, and anyway, I'm not so crazy about seeing an ordinary old football game. . . ."

"I'm saving the best for last," Bart said. "I'm to round up a lot of my friends the same size I am for next week, to do the same work. And I told the man about you, and he wants you to supervise us. Would you like to do that?" Bart asked anxiously.

"As I started to say, Bart," Bertie replied, carefully putting the broom aside, "I am very fond of football, and will consider the offer carefully this coming week. What time do we report for work?"

CHAPTER SIX

BERTIE PODDLE shuffled reluctantly across the ring holding his left hand out and keeping his right cocked for an opening. He sighted over his left glove at the broad, scowling face of Wiggins Hackenlooper, deciding to feint with his left and come in hard with his right.

Wiggins came out from his corner with a determined stalking walk. He hunched his big shoulders, and worked forward behind his gloves, touching his nose with them in a professional manner, blowing and snorting as he faced Bertie. The facial expressions Wiggins produced would have been enough to frighten a lesser man out of the ring, but Bertie knew Wiggins wasn't really angry — it was part of his style.

Bertie feinted with his left while Wiggins was still several feet away, hoping to interrupt the relentless advance that Wiggins had begun. As the feint had no effect, Bertie changed his original strategy, and decided to wait Wiggins out. Bertie retreated, circling the ring, his hands in a defensive position. On the second circle around Bertie discovered that sixteen-ounce gloves gain weight with amazing speed. His arms began to ache, and he wondered how long it would be before the round ended.

On the third circle Bertie lowered his left hand for a moment, to rest it. A second later a boxing glove the size of a blimp flew at him from out of nowhere, and caught his left ear with a resounding thump. Bertie's head rolled sideways and then rolled back up again. As his head came up it was once more greeted with a solid whack, and Bertie dropped.

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At the count of three Bertie lifted himself to a sitting position and tried to feel his left ear, to find out if it were still attached to his head. At the count of six the bell sounded for the end of the round. Wiggins pranced back to his corner, snorting and blowing, and pawing impatiently at the air. Bertie got up slowly and limped back to his corner where Ted Dale was acting as his second.

"Keep your left out, Bertie," Ted instructed as he set out a stool for Bertie to sit on and flapped a wet towel in Bertie's face.

"I try," Bertie said, his dry throat aching for water. "But he does it first. How is my left ear?"

"It's still there," Ted said, taking a long drink of water and setting the bottle down beyond Bertie's reach. "Don't worry about it. The swelling will go down. Now in the next round...."

"Water," Bertie croaked hoarsely. "Water."

Ted handed him the bottle. "Just rinse your mouth," he said. "And save some for me."

Bertie took several large gulps of water, breathing heavily. "Your sister Marcia certainly has the right ideas," Bertie complained. "Whatever gave her the idea that I could take Wiggins's place on the boxing team?"

"You told her you had a book on the manly art of self defense," Ted defended his sister. "All about scientific boxing. I heard you."

"Sure I have it," Bertie moaned. "But she didn't give me a chance to tell her I haven't read it yet."

"There's the bell," Ted said, slapping Bertie on the back. "Go in and give Wiggins a battle. Carry the fight to him."

"Yeah? And who'll carry me from the fight?" Bertie asked bitterly over his shoulder.

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Bertie shuffled forward again, waving his arms at Wiggins like a pugnacious grasshopper waving his antennae at a bull. Wiggins charged, and Bertie, back-peddalling rapidly, struck two or three blows in his defense, all of which punished Wiggins severely around the wrists. Bertie backed into the ropes, and they snapped him back into the ring again. As Bertie bounced off the ropes, Wiggins uncorked a long, looping right. It missed Bertie's jaw, and once more hammered his tender left ear. The force of the blow carried Bertie sideways, turned him, and sat him down on the canvas with a dusty thump.

The boxing coach, who was acting as referee, blew his whistle. "That's enough fun for today," he said cheerfully as Bertie got groggily to his feet. "Others are waiting. You two can have another go at each other tomorrow."

Wiggins nodded, hitting his gloves together. "See you tomorrow?" he asked Bertie as they walked across the ring together.

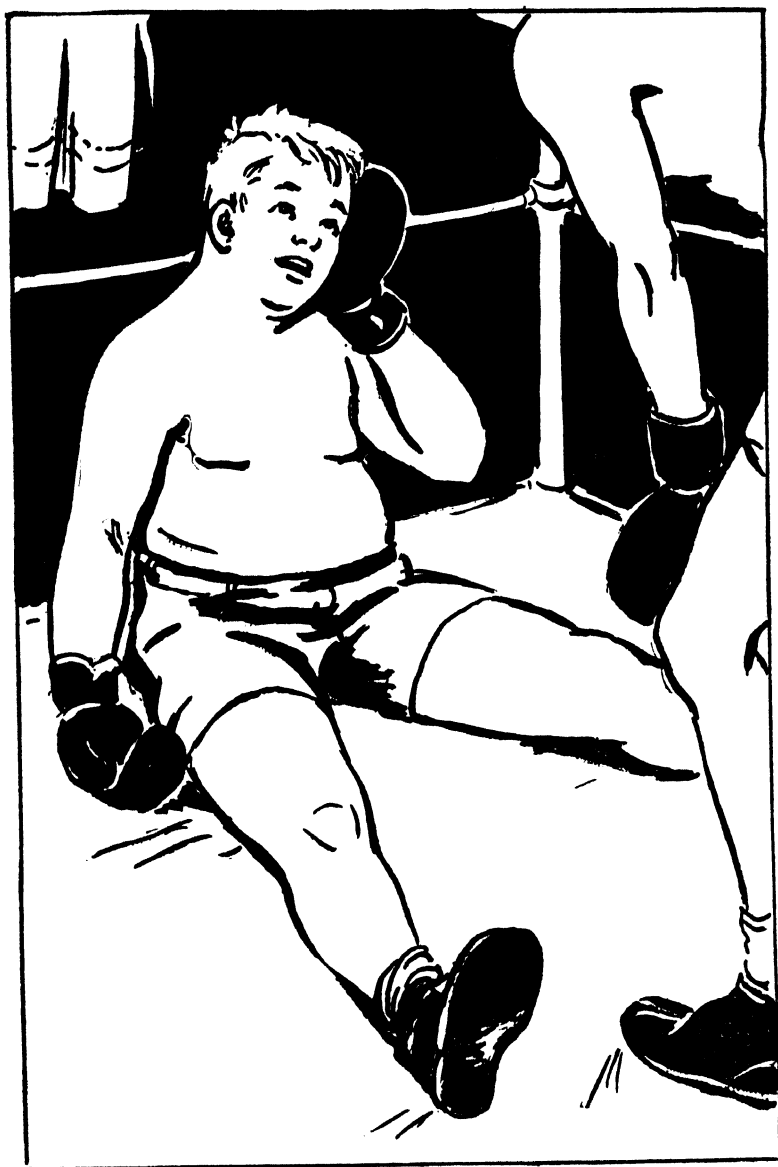
"Sure, if I can make it." Bertie racked his brains for a good excuse to stay away, but couldn't think of any.

Ted unlaced Bertie's gloves. "You should keep your eye on his right," Ted advised.

Bertie pulled his sweaty hands free and flexed his fingers. "How can I?" he demanded. "He's always got it on my ear." Bertie looked on mournfully as Ted untaped his hands. "It's no use, Ted," he said. "I'm not the pugilistic type. I'll have to find some other activity."

"But you're as big as Wiggins," Ted objected. "You weigh just as much."

"I weigh more." Bertie felt his left ear. "Only in the wrong places. Boy, my ear feels like it could win first prize in a cauliflower show."



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Bertie went on alone to take his shower and change clothes. He discovered several other sore places where Wiggins had pounded him. Bertie shook his head carefully. Darn it, he was sure in another jam. It would be the football story all over again. He'd take the punishment in practice, and Wiggins would be the one to represent the school and win the letter. It was all right to talk about school spirit, but it could be carried too far. There was no sense making a career out of being a tackling dummy and a sparring partner or anything else that made him a living exercise machine for Wiggins Hackenlooper.

No, Bertie decided, he would not return to the ring. He'd be able to think up some excuse by tomorrow, and he could bow out gracefully. It might be hard to explain to Marcia, but if he stuck with boxing she might not care to be seen with him anyway — what with a cauliflower ear and a few teeth missing, and maybe a mashed nose.

Bertie dressed and was combing his hair when Wilbur Frost, his lips already curved into the familiar faint smile of mockery, came in. "Hello, Poddle," Wilbur greeted him. "Anything to say for the school paper?"

Wilbur put one foot on a bench and poised a pencil over a notebook.

"What do you mean?" Bertie asked. "What kind of saying?"

"I want an exclusive story from you," Wilbur said, grinning. "A first-person story on how it feels to be knocked on your ear. I've been watching your progress, and I think you're the most qualified to do it."

"Maybe you'd like some first hand experience," Bertie said angrily, clenching his fists.

Wilbur ignored Bertie's challenge. "Why don't you give up,

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Poddle?" he asked. "Didn't football teach you anything? Or do you like being the school clown?"

Bertie turned and took a step toward Wilbur, a boiling anger spurring him to action. Wilbur faced him, putting both feet on the floor, waiting. But before they could go into action, Wiggins Hackenlooper came around the row of lockers.

"What's the matter with you, Wilbur?" Wiggins's voice fairly boomed. "Why don't you leave Bertie alone? I heard what you just said."

"Never mind, Wiggins." Bertie was angry to find his own voice trembling. "I can handle this myself."

"It's just the idea," Wiggins persisted, facing Wilbur. "Why don't you lay off Bertie? He's doing his best."

"I'll fight my own battles, Wiggins," Bertie broke in, feeling ashamed by the intervention.

"You're a good guy, Bertie," Wiggins said with ponderous good nature. "I don't like to see this fellow get your goat."

"I just told him the truth," Wilbur said. "If he does it, it's no crime to write it. Everybody in school knows about Bertie's try to get on every team, and never making any. He's a school character. It's my duty to write about him. I was being friendly by telling him to quit. If he insists on sticking his neck out, he can't gripe because it makes us laugh."

"Aw, Bertie doesn't care about being a big shot. He takes part because he gets a lot of fun out of it, don't you, Bertie?"

"Sure. I-I like it."

"Okay," Wilbur shrugged his shoulders. "But I have a right to give my readers the best stories I find. Bertie is good copy. I've laid off him long enough. If he's such a good sport, he won't mind it. I won't say anything that isn't true — I don't have to."

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"You'd better be careful, that's all," Bertie shouted, as Wilbur walked away.

"What's he got against you?" Wiggins asked as Wilbur disappeared.

Bertie's cheeks flushed a deeper red. "He's sore because Marcia Dale likes me better than she does him," he said. "And he's trying to cut me out by writing things in the school paper. I warned him once, and he was smart and kept quiet. But if he goes too far, he knows what will happen to him. I'll flatten him. I'll show him who the clown is. I'll clown him right on the button."

"Remember to keep your left up," Wiggins advised with authority. "That's where you're weak. See you tomorrow, Bertie."

"Uhuh." Bertie picked up his books and left the locker room.

There was no question of quitting now. Not unless there was foolproof reason. He couldn't let it appear that he had taken Wilbur's advice — that would mean he was admitting the truth of Wilbur's jibe. Maybe it was true, maybe he *was* the school clown, but why jump on a guy for trying? Darn it, if he could only find something to do — something that he was good at, it didn't matter what — then the laugh would be on Wilbur, and all those other failures wouldn't be so bad. But to fail at *everything*, that wasn't fair.

In this mood Bertie walked through the halls of the school, on his way to pick up a book he had forgotten in his hall locker. As he passed the auditorium he heard the sound of music and looked in. Several serious-looking students were busy at violins, a cello and a piano, playing a vague classical work. It looked so peaceful, and they looked so respectable. Bertie sighed. That was really an activity. Little chance of having

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a jaw broken or maybe an ear torn off playing Mozart, or Bach.

Well, why not? It would mean regular practicing, a thing he despised, but it was a way out. Bertie thought of his violin, gathering dust at home. Maybe it would be easier to practice if he had a reason for it. There wouldn't be any letter to win, but it was a nice refined activity, and Marcia would certainly think highly of him. Yes, music was worthwhile, dignified, and honorable, and he would be sure of not having to compete with Wiggins.

Bertie had been taking violin lessons off and on for several years, and although he knew he was far from being an accomplished violinist, he figured he might make the school symphony, and with seventy other musicians making noise around him, the mistakes he made wouldn't be heard anyway.

He hurried down the hall to the office of the music teacher, Professor Ziml Potchkoff. Professor Potchkoff was a huge man with a bristling black beard, who always wore a black suitcoat and striped gray trousers. Bertie had seen him many times, striding along the halls muttering to himself, threatening to run over any student who didn't leap from his path. The Professor was formidable, but then, so was Wiggins. Bertie entered the office.

The office was empty, so Bertie sat on the edge of a straight chair to wait. Some day, he was sure, from this inauspicious beginning, he would emerge as Bertram Poddle, internationally known musician, composer and conductor, while Wiggins would still be fighting prelims in Jersey City, and Wilbur was copy boy on a weekly newspaper. He could see it all — the great hall filled with distinguished men and and women, and the hundred-piece symphony which he was about to direct in the first performance of his newest original symphony. Thun-

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derous applause as Poddle, the master, steps out to the podium. Silence, as he lifts his baton, and the hundred musicians await his signal.

Suddenly the door of the office was kicked violently open and Professor Potchkoff stormed into the office, ripping a musical score to shreds and hurling the pieces to the floor. "Ignorances!" he bellowed at his desk, not seeing Bertie. "Such ignorances of music! Murderers! In a prison they should all be for such playing!"

Bertie quickly decided to postpone his entrance into the world of music. He slid off the edge of the chair and eased toward the door, hoping to escape before the Professor noticed him. But just as Bertie reached the door the professor whirled around. "What do you want in here, you boy, you?" he roared.

"N-nothing important," Bertie stammered. "I'll come back tomorrow."

"Sit down!" Potchkoff bellowed through his beard. "Tomorrow I am perhaps in a bad mood and refuse to look at you. What do you want?"

"I thought I'd like to audition for the symphony orchestra," Bertie said in a weak, uncertain voice. "But I see that you are busy. . . ."

"Of course I am busy," Potchkoff said in a loud, complaining voice. "Always I am busy." He stroked his beard and looked at Bertie. "But always I find time to listen to a fellow artist. Please, what is your instrument?"

"The violin," Bertie said, "I guess. But I . . ."

"I can use a violinist," the Professor muttered. "In two or three days perhaps I strangle a first violinist who is always giving me trouble. Always he is a thirty-second too slow on

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the Beethoven, the criminal." He reached in his desk and pulled out some cotton which he stuffed in his ears. "Where is your instrument, boy?"

"I — I guess I don't have it," Bertie said, patting his pockets vaguely. "But some other time. . . ."

"A bad start, my young friend," Potchkoff shouted. "A violinist should have always by his side the violin. Never out of sight. It is his best friend. But, I let you use mine. What will you play for me, boy? Something modern? I like modern. Give me something from the new work by Sasha Feutillion, 'Impressions du Steel Mill.' Try the third movement, which is for violin and sledge hammer, 'L'Apres Midi d'un Foundry'."

Bertie accepted the violin with trembling hands. "The last piece I learned was 'The Dance of the Happy Mountains'," he whispered.

The Professor struck himself on the forehead with his palm. "Play, Play," he muttered in a defeated tone. "I need badly a violinist."

Bertie tucked the violin under his chin and grasped the bow. Professor Potchkoff leaped from his chair. "No! No! Nono-nono No! It is a bow and violin you are holding, not a bow and arrow. Play!"

Bertie sawed gallantly into the opening bars of his number — as he remembered them. Professor Potchkoff clutched his heart and groaned. "Stop!" he howled. "How dare you call yourself a violinist? You have the touch of an ox! The musical soul of a toad! You are tarrible!"

Bertie put the violin down on the corner of the desk. He lifted his shaking hand and knocked the violin to the floor. Professor Potchkoff closed his eyes and muttered something rapidly under his breath.

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"Is that . . . all?" Bertie asked hopefully, picking up the violin and putting it on the desk again.

"Get out," Professor Potchkoff said hoarsely. "Out! If I ever see in your hands again a violin, I will call the police!"

Bertie took up his books and creaked toward the door. "Good-by, sir," Bertie said politely.

"Wait!"

Bertie turned, frightened. The Professor had jumped up from his chair and was advancing with a gleam in his eye. Bertie backed up hurriedly, wondering if he should stick out his left.

The Professor pulled a tape measure from his pocket and quickly measured the width of Bertie's shoulders. As he read the results, his scowl gave way to a broad smile. "Sit down, you boy, you," he said in a pleasant voice. "Let us discuss further your place in music."

"But you said . . ." Bertie protested, puzzled.

"I was hasty," the Professor explained with a wave of his hand. "After all, my boy, the violin is not the only instrument. Have you ever thought of being in the school band? You can wear the beautiful blue and white uniform and the gold buttons. So stirring, no?"

Bertie blinked. "But I don't play any band instruments, sir. Only the violin."

The Professor turned slightly purple. "Please, don't say that word," he hissed. Then he calmed himself. "I will help you find a place in the band, my boy. We have been looking for somebody with exactly your talent and size. We have already a uniform that will fit you. Tomorrow you will report for practice, no?"

"I'd be glad to," Bertie said. "If the school needs me. . . ."

"It needs, it needs," Potchkoff said quickly. "Tomorrow,

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you report. And please, my boy, stay away from the violin. It is such a delicate instrument."

Bertie left the office and hurried home, bubbling with enthusiasm. It wasn't until an hour after his interview that it occurred to him that no instrument had been mentioned, and he was still in the dark as to his new duties. Bertie wondered if they needed someone to understudy the leader. It was the only thing he could think of, and it made him very proud.

The next afternoon Bertie reported to the band. It was an exceptionally warm day for December, and the musicians were taking advantage of the mild weather to practice outside. Bertie drew a uniform and put it on. He felt very military and clean-cut in his white trousers and blue coat with the gold buttons and gold braid. The visor cap fit him perfectly, and his heart sang with joy as he marched outside to look up the band leader and begin his work with the band.

Outside the band was assembling, and the air was filled with strange sounds as the musicians wandered around tuning their instruments and running through little passages of music on their own. Bertie approached the leader, restraining a desire to salute. "I'm Poddle," Bertie said. "Professor Potchkoff sent me."

"Welcome to our ranks, Poddle." The leader shook his hand. "We're happy to have you. All set to go to work?"

"You bet," Bertie said, eyeing the baton and wondering when his chance would come to lead the first number.

"Fine. Report to Hyacinth O'Houlihan. You'll work with her."

Bertie paled. He was about to protest, but he could not shirk his duty — the uniform wouldn't let him. He wheeled and set off smartly, looking for Hyacinth.

It was easy to find her. She was dressed in a blue and white

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uniform, like everyone else, but her small cap covered only a fraction of her mass of flaming red hair. She was struggling with a huge drum.

"Can I help you, Hyacinth?" Bertie volunteered pleasantly.

Hyacinth looked up, brushing the hair out of her face. "Well," she said, remembering the cheer-leading fiasco. "I didn't know they were going to have clowns in the band."

Bertie ignored the insult. "I've been directed to work with you," he said. "What do we play?"

"*We* don't play anything," Hyacinth said tartly. "*I* play. You carry."

"Carry . . . ?" Bertie looked doubtfully at the big bass drum.

"Carry," Hyacinth repeated. "Now hoist this drum on your back. We have to be ready to play in four minutes."

Bertie wriggled into the harness and lifted the drum, grunting. Just as he stood up a bomb exploded in his hat, and he jumped.

"Stand still!" Hyacinth shouted, twirling a large drumstick. "I'm tuning up." She reached forward and gave the drum another whack, almost deafening Bertie.

Hyacinth ceased pounding and came around to the front, where Bertie was bent under the drum. "Do you know the routines?" she asked.

"What routines?" Bertie turned his head to look at her, feeling like an aged horse attached to an ice wagon.

"The marching formations."

"No. I didn't know we were going to march."

Hyacinth groaned. "Well, every time the leader blows his whistle, we go into a new formation. So when you hear the whistle, listen for me, and I'll tell you how to turn."

"Okay," Bertie agreed. "But yell so I can hear you."

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Hyacinth led Bertie to their place in the band formation. He was already tiring, and the drum felt as though it were made of lead. His uniform, which had fit him so tightly, and was so fine for standing, was not so fine for bending and carrying. Bertie looked enviously at the musicians who carried fifes, and hoped he would be able to breathe.

A whistle blew and the entire band crashed into sound. But above it all, Bertie heard — and felt — the mighty blows which Hyacinth was dealing the drum. The whistle blew again, and Bertie strained his ears to hear Hyacinth's directions. He heard her voice, shrill and commanding, but he couldn't make out what she was saying. He tried to look back at her, and as he did, she gave the drum a mighty shove from behind. Caught off balance, Bertie fell flat on his face, and the drum rolled over his head.

Several musicians helped Bertie regain his feet, and the band was ready to start again. Bertie didn't dare look at Hyacinth. This time, as soon as the whistle blew, Bertie lurched forward. He had taken three steps before he missed the sound of the drum. He halted and looked back. Hyacinth was just picking herself up. She had taken a mighty swing at the drum, but just then Bertie had moved, she had missed, and swung herself off her feet.

"Sorry," Bertie panted. He turned around to run back, and the drum on his back knocked over a glockenspiel player, who fell to earth with a musical crash.

Once more the band assumed the starting position. Hyacinth grabbed Bertie by his gold coat buttons. "Listen, you bird brain," she raged. "From now on you get your directions from this," and she waved the drumstick under his nose. "When I want you to turn left, I'll tap you on the left side of the head.

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Right turn, right side. To start, I'll give you a push. To stop, I'll pull on the drum. The stick is padded, so it won't hurt — much."

Before Bertie could protest the whistle blew again. Hyacinth got behind the drum, and then her push started Bertie forward. About a hundred yards on, Bertie heard the whistle, and almost at the same moment the drumstick whistled through the air and whacked him solidly on the left ear, which was still red from Wiggins's work the day before.

"Ouch!" Bertie yelled, obediently making a left turn. But his cry of pain was drowned by the cheerful strains of the marching music.

"Wheeeee! Wheeeeeeee!" The whistle shrilled twice. Bertie was yanked to a stop, and at the same second the drumstick smacked him on the right side of the head, knocking his cap off. Bertie tried to bend down and pick it up and make a right turn at the same time. He felt Hyacinth bump into the drum, and then a rain of drumstick blows descended on the top of Bertie's head. Since he knew he was not expected to march straight up in the air, he knew Hyacinth was showing her displeasure.

Again the band re-formed and marched. Bertie's back felt as though it would break at any moment, and he was dizzy from the effect of Hyacinth's directions on his head. Dimly, Bertie heard the whistle shriek. Sensing a left turn, he turned of his own accord, cringing under the drum to avoid Hyacinth's lusty swing. The band marched to the right.

"Watch out!" Bertie yelled as a bandsman marched upon him carrying a beeping Sousaphone. His warning was lost in a tremendous "Oompah-oompah!" and then they all went down in a tangle.

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When the bell of the bass horn was removed from his head, Bertie saw that a weeping Hyacinth was being restrained from force by two husky bandsmen. The leader of the band himself helped Bertie out of the drum harness and suggested tactfully that perhaps Bertie was not musically inclined, and that if he took the uniform off carefully, so as not to tear it further, there would be no hard feelings.

Bertie thanked him, and swinging wide of Hyacinth, headed for the locker room. As he changed clothes he could hear the regular "poom-poom-poom" of the big bass drum as Hyacinth imagined it was Bertie and not the drum she was beating.



Bertie slithered across the ring and fainted at Wiggins Hackenlooper with his left. A brawny hand knocked Bertie's hand aside, and then a large boxing glove smashed Bertie on the left ear. Bertie winced, but he swung his right, catching Wiggins under the heart. As they clinched, Wiggins said, "I hope I didn't hit that ear too hard, Bertie. It looks sore. I'll keep away from it."

"That's all right, Wiggins," Bertie said happily. "You can hit it all you want. It's a wonderful feeling."

"What?" Wiggins asked, amazed. "Getting hit on the ear?"

"No," Bertie said. "Being allowed to hit back."

As the two boys faced each other in the center of the ring, Wilbur Frost came in to observe and make a few notes for his sports column. When he saw Wiggins and Bertie, Wilbur grinned, and sat where he could see the show.



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Wilbur jotted down several caustic comments about Bertie's fistic endeavors, roughing out enough jokes to fill his column. It really was funny to see the fresh-faced fat boy trying to match fists with Wiggins. Wilbur shook his head wonderingly as he saw how easily Wiggins was able to defend himself, and rap Bertie at will. Some people, Wilbur thought, didn't know when they were out of their class.

Thoroughly enjoying the match, and thinking of the comments he would write, Wilbur watched the show. The other boxers, waiting their turn to work out, were also grinning at Bertie's awkward attempts to meet Wiggins in the ring.

The two boys with the gloves on circled each other warily. Then Wiggins advanced, jabbing, and Bertie was forced back to the ropes. They shuffled and panted, breathing heavily, their gloves thudding, until they were almost directly over the spot where Wilbur sat. Suddenly Wiggins saw an opening and threw a strong left that went past Bertie's gloves and caught him on the jaw. Wilbur chuckled as he saw Bertie's legs buckle, and waited for Bertie to fall. But Bertie didn't fall. Dazed, he clutched at the ropes for support, pulled himself up, lowered his head and pumped his arms at Wiggins, although he could hardly stand.

From where he sat, Wilbur caught a look at Bertie's face before Bertie turned. The round face, red-marked from Wiggins' punches, was set in a grim, almost desperate look. Hopelessness and determination were mixed in a twisted grimace as Bertie waded into a flurry of Wiggins' blows. Wilbur stopped laughing as he saw Bertie walk into Wiggins' gloves, absorbing punch after punch, and tiredly trying to fight back.

Wilbur watched Bertie, outclassed and outfought, moving in again and again. The other boxers were getting a kick out

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of the show, but Wilbur looked down at the notes and jokes he had made, and looked again at Bertie. Then, slowly, Wilbur tore his notes into shreds and dropped them in a wastebasket.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BERTIE PODDLE, the famous American private detective, had heard about the London fog; now he was trapped in it. "Curses," he muttered to himself as the mist swirled thickly about his head. "I should have listened to Holmes."

Earlier that evening, in Sherlock's apartment, the great English detective had looked gloomily from his window and said, "The terrible London fog is upon us, my dear Poddle. I fear we will be unable to apprehend the notorious Doctor Konka, who, at this very moment, is on his way to blow up Trafalgar Square. Even I, my dear Poddle, am helpless in this fog." And Sherlock moodily picked up his violin and began to play the Grieg Piano Concerto.

"I will foil Doctor Konka this night, Mr. Holmes," the young American manhunter said modestly. "I may be new to London, sir, but, as you know, I am not unfamiliar with the methods of thwarting the evil plans of criminals." Poddle was not boasting. It was a matter of common world knowledge that when it came to tracking down criminals, this fifteen-year-old American private detective ranked with the greatest. He had flown to London at the request of Sherlock Holmes, and refused to admit defeat.

"Good luck to you, Poddle," Holmes said mysteriously. "If

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you can succeed where Holmes has failed, I will lead the rest of the world in acclaiming your genius. Eh, Doctor Watson?"

"Umph, umph," said that worthy character, suddenly awakening from his doze and quickly polishing a few surgical instruments. "Can't be done, confound it. Hopeless. When I was in India . . ."

"I will go at once," Poddle said, interrupting politely but firmly. "When Doctor Konka arrives at Trafalgar Square, I will be waiting for him."

"You'll be lost . . ." Holmes protested.

"I had with me on the airplane a detailed map of London, which I committed to memory," Poddle said. "Good night, gentlemen."

And now he was trapped in the fog. As he groped blindly ahead, a hoarse, guttural voice sputtered at him. Poddle saw the gleam of a knife in the fog, and raised his arm to ward off the blow.

"Yes, Mr. Poddle? You know the answer? You wish to recite?"

The London fog evaporated, and Bertie realized he was sitting in his seat in German class, his hand in the air, and the eyes of the teacher, Mr. Konka, were regarding him steadily.

"Oh," Bertie said. "Was my hand in the air? I didn't realize. I . . . I was wondering where it . . . was . . ." He pulled his hand down and looked at it reprovingly.

"And now," Mr. Konka said, "the translation."

"I didn't quite hear you," Bertie said. "Would you mind repeating the question, please?"

"You will please translate into German, the lesson on page one hundred and ten."

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Bertie slid out from under his desk and got to his feet. As he did, the book on his lap fell to the floor. Bertie picked it up and returned it to his desk.

"What book is that?" Mr. Konka asked, looking over the tops of his glasses.

"My German book, sir," Bertie answered, holding up his grammar.

"*Nein*. Not the one in your hand. The one you were reading just now. The title. Please read it."

"T-The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes," Bertie said in a whisper.

"Aha," Mr. Konka said. "And now, the translation." He sat back and regarded Bertie grimly.

Bertie found his place in the book and began reading. "*Ish bin . . .*"

"No, no," Mr. Konka protested. "The word is not 'Ish.' It is pronounced 'Ich.' In your throat, softly, so the sound expels naturally, with the breath. Try again."

"*Ick bin . . .*" Bertie tried.

Mr. Konka threw up his hands. "*Ish, Ick*, everything but *Ich*. If you want a passing grade in this class, Mr. Poddle, I would advise you to read your detective mysteries in some other class. Again, the passage."

Bertie licked his lips and frowned at the page. "*Ig . . . Itch . . . bin.*"

"Enough," Mr. Konka shouted wearily. "Enough."

As Bertie sat down, Mr. Konka looked at his watch. "Before the period ends," he said, "I want to announce that the Language Department is holding the annual reciting contest. The first prize is twenty-five dollars. If there are any people in this class who think they can memorize a poem or passage in

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German well enough to enter the contest, let me know. Mr. Poddle, you will see me after class."

When the bell sounded, Bertie marched dutifully to Mr. Konka's desk and awaited the wrathful denunciation for which the teacher was known. But instead of a bawling out, Bertie received a more disturbing treatment. Mr. Konka regarded Bertie silently for a few moments, wiping his glasses with a handkerchief as he did. "Bertram," he said finally, "is something troubling you?"

"No sir," Bertie answered. "I feel fine."

"Are you bored in class?"

"Oh no," Bertie answered vehemently. "I like German, Mr. Konka."

"Yes? Why?"

Bertie tried to find an answer to that, but in the end he stood silent and blushing before his teacher.

"You seem recently to have difficulty in concentrating," Mr. Konka said. "Many times I look at you, intending to call on you to recite, and I pass over, because you seem to be far away, thinking of other things. Is something wrong at home?" He asked this kindly.

"No," Bertie said. "I guess it's just me."

"You must try to pay attention in the future," Mr. Konka said. "A mind . . . a memory . . . these things must be trained. Either you go forward, or you go backward. You must pay attention in the future, and work harder. Is it hard for you to remember?"

"I — I don't think so," Bertie said hesitantly. "I'll try from now on, Mr. Konka."

"Good. And Bertram . . ."

"Yes?"

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"Perhaps in the future you will find it easier to concentrate on German if you leave Sherlock Holmes at home, eh?"

"I will," Bertie promised humbly, glad he was getting off so easily.

"Also Captain Midnight, Superman, and other comic books," Mr. Konka added. "Unless, of course, they are written in German." He laughed briefly at his joke and dismissed Bertie.

Bertie hurried down the hall to his locker. This had been his last class of the day, and he was anxious to get home, so he could get the couch before Bart tired of being outside, and continue the adventures of Sherlock.

What was Mr. Konka driving at, Bertie wondered. Asking him if he found it hard to concentrate. It sounded as though he were worried about Bertie's mind. His mind was all right, and his memory was good. He could remember anything he wanted to, if he wanted to. It was just that German was so dull, that was why he couldn't remember much about it. And Geometry was the same way, and English, and . . . All the things they taught in school any more were dull. That was the only reason he had trouble remembering very much. It wasn't his fault — it was the school's.

Bertie promptly forgot about school. It was Friday afternoon, the weekend was ahead, and Monday was a long way off. He was happy to find Bart not yet at home when he arrived, and after a brief but thorough raid on the refrigerator, Bertie settled himself on the couch with several satisfied grunts, and turned his full attention to the adventures in the book in his hand.

The next morning Bertie had planned to spend outdoors, but the weather changed his plans. When he awoke, a cold rain was falling, and instead of going out, he headed for the

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couch again, piling up a stack of books on the floor to read one after the other. None of them had anything to do with German, Geometry, or any other subject considered essential by the people who planned the courses of instruction at Heeble High.

Bertie was engrossed in an adventure when Bart ambled into the living room looking miserable and bored. For a few minutes he wandered about, looking at and touching everything in the room, and finally he climbed on the couch at Bertie's feet.

Bertie moved his feet up to make room, and paid no further attention to Bart. Bart sat quietly for all of fifteen seconds, and then he reached forward and punched Bertie's book sharply, so that it flew out of Bertie's hands and fell on the floor.

"Cut that out!" Bertie cried indignantly, reaching for the book. "I'll wham you one if you try that trick again."

"I'm sorry," Bart said contritely, settling back. "I didn't mean to."

"That's what you always say." Bertie found his place and started reading again. His peace was too much for Bart. After a few more seconds of boredom, Bart reached forward and punched the book again. This time Bertie grabbed Bart by the arm, pulled him forward, and whacked him solidly on the seat of his pants. Bart immediately broke into a loud howl, and that brought Mrs. Poddle to the scene.

"He hit me," Bart sobbed as his mother appeared.

"Well, he knocked the book out of my hands twice," Bertie said. "I told him not to."

"I wish you two could get along for five minutes," Mrs. Poddle declared. "Bart, if you don't want to get hurt, stay away. And Bertie, try to remember that Bart is just a child."

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You're older, and bigger, and you ought to set an example for him."

"Well, tell him to leave me alone," Bertie said.

"I wish it would stop raining," she said. "I'd send you both out of the house."

Mrs. Poddle went out, and peace reigned. Bertie returned to his reading, and Bart played with some of the toys he had been given for Christmas. But it was one of those Saturday mornings, and soon Bertie was tired of reading and Bart tired of playing. They both wanted to go out, and compromised by standing with their noses pressed against the window, and looked out in the street.

"Why did it have to rain today?" Bart asked suddenly.

Bertie watched a car drive by, its tires sending out little showers of water. "I don't know," he answered irritably. "How should I know?"

Bart rubbed his nose against the window, making circles. "Tell me something, Bertie," he said. "Talk to me."

"Well," Bertie answered seriously, "What would you like to know?"

"Tell me something that will make me laugh."

Bertie thought and thought, but he couldn't think of anything funny. It was that kind of day.

"Aren't you going to tell me anything?" Bart prodded.

"I'll tell you to go away in a minute," Bertie growled. "Who do you think I am, Fred Allen or somebody? Think up your own jokes."

"Tell me something else," Bart insisted. He looked outside and found inspiration for his questions. "Do you know anything about the weather? What makes it rain? Is it true that

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there are air pockets in the air, and if an airplane flies into one it falls to the ground?"

"Take it easy," Bertie said. "I've just been reading about that in one of my books. Captain Future had the answers on his science page."

"Tell me," Bart urged. "All about it."

"Well," Bertie said, wanting Bart to understand, "it's the warm vapor that rises from the earth, see? This warm air rises, and when it gets up in the air, it cools, and becomes a cloud. Well, it keeps going higher and higher, getting colder and colder. When all the tiny droplets of moisture get cold enough, they become ice, and start falling down. On the way down they thaw, and by the time they hit the ground, they are water. Just like this rain we see now. It started out as ice falling. Understand?"

"Sure. Now tell me about air pockets."

"No such thing," Bertie said. "What they used to call an air pocket is nothing more or less than a wind that blows straight down, instead of sideways. You know, Bart, some winds do that — blow straight up and down. They call them updrafts, or downdrafts. A so-called air pocket is a downdraft. Sometimes they blow as hard as two hundred miles an hour."

"Gosh," Bart whispered, properly impressed. "You sure know a lot, don't you, Bertie?"

"I know what I know," Bertie said. "And I never stop learning. Always forward, Bart, or the mind goes backward. That's philosophy."

"I know some things too," Bart said, not wanting to be completely shut out. "I know a lot of poems. Do you know the one that goes 'Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you . . . ?'"

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Bertie burst out laughing. "Why Bart," he said, "That's old stuff."

"I just wanted to tell you something," Bart said, hurt.

"What could I learn from you?" Bertie asked tolerantly. "Not that I think you are stupid, for you are really quite intelligent, and you will probably be as smart as I am when you go to Heeble. But there isn't anything you know that I don't. That's life."

"Look, Bertie," Bart said happily. "The rain has stopped. Let's go out."

"Okay," Bertie said. "Go up and get our coats, and we'll stroll to town and back."

Bart ran off to get their clothes, and when he returned, the two brothers went out into the street. The clouds were breaking up, and the sun was shining through in several places. The air was cool and fresh. The boys were in high spirits as they escaped from the house and went to town.

As they walked down the main street, looking wistfully at the store windows, Bart noticed a crowd of people gathered at a corner. They rushed over, to see what was the cause of the excitement. Bertie, standing on tiptoe, was able to see over the heads of the people in front of him. "It's the Man on the Street radio program," Bertie said. "The one where they ask you questions and give you money if you know the answers."

"Good," Bart said eagerly. "Let's push up close, Bertie, and maybe he'll ask you a question. Would you know the answer?"

"Of course," Bertie said. "Perhaps I'll be able to show you."

Using his bulk to good advantage, Bertie shoved his way forward with Bart hanging on behind. Just as Bertie arrived at the inner part of the circle around the microphone, the

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announcer finished with the person he was questioning and looked around for someone else. Bertie eased forward, looking eager, but the announcer's eye passed over him. "Ah," the announcer said. "Here's a bright-looking young lad." He approached Bertie, but reached out to take Bart by the hand. "What's your name, son?"

"Bartholomew Poddle."

"Well, well, is that so? Isn't that fine? Would you like to try winning some money by answering my questions?"

Bart nodded vigorously, and the crowd laughed. "The radio audience can't see you," the announcer said jovially. "You'll have to speak up."

"Yes," Bart said boldly. "Ask me something."

The announcer looked at some slips of paper in his hand. "Some of these are pretty hard for a young fellow, but we'll give you a try. Want to talk about the weather?"

"Sure," Bart said confidently, looking at Bertie.

"Then tell our listeners where you think the rain comes from. Some stories say that an old witch . . ."

"That's not true," Bart broke in scornfully. "Rain comes when the water droplets in the clouds go up so high they freeze together as ice, and then fall, and they melt on the way down and are rain when they get here."

The announcer blinked. "Say, you are informed for a youngster. Our next question has to do with air pockets. You know, those places in the air where there just isn't any air, and an airplane flying into them just drops."

"There aren't any air pockets," Bart said. "Those are down-drafts. Winds that blow straight down, instead of sideways."

"Listen," the announcer cried. "Where did you find all that information? What are you, a walking encyclopedia?"

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"My brother told me," Bart said, pointing to Bertie. "He knows about everything."

The announcer brought his microphone over to Bertie. "I'm going to give your little brother ten dollars for answering those questions," he said. "A memory like that should be rewarded. Now, how is your memory?"

"Good," Bertie said.

"Well," the announcer continued, "Since Bart answered the questions you knew, I'll ask you some questions that he can probably answer now, and which you once knew, but might not remember."

"I know everything Bart knows," Bertie said. "And much more. Everything he knows he learned from me."

"That's fine, because I'm going to ask you about nursery rhymes."

"I know all about the weather," Bertie said. "Clouds, and wind. . . ."

"I know that. But do you remember the nursery rhymes you used to know? Give me the second line to 'Pussy cat, pussy-cat, where have you been?'"

Bertie looked at Bart and wished he had let Bart finish the rhyme earlier. He tried desperately to think — he really knew — but the microphone and the giggling crowd were making him nervous. "To the city," Bertie finally whispered.

"What city?"

Bertie looked at the sky and bit his lips, and then at Bart, who was trying to coach him. "To . . . to . . . London!" Bertie cried triumphantly.

"Correct. And for what purpose?"

"To visit the queen," Bertie added, ending, as far as he knew, the entire little poem.

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"But what did the cat do in London?"

"Visited the queen," Bertie repeated.

"What else?"

"The cat?"

"Yes."

"Just . . . In London?"

"Yes."

"Visited," Bertie said, sweating. "Pleasantly."

"What one thing did the cat do there?" the announcer persisted.

Bertie thought and thought.

"Time's getting short," the announcer said.

Bertie took a desperate chance. "It ate crumpets and drank tea," he said in a positive voice, trying to convince the announcer. "It's been so long since . . ."

"Do you know the answer Bart?" the announcer asked.

"The cat frightened a little mouse under her chair," Bart piped up.

"Right. Sorry you didn't win your ten dollars, Bertie. Better luck next time. Bart, when you boys get home, perhaps you'd better teach your big brother the things you know. You can never tell when they'll come in handy. Thanks, boys."

On the way home Bart said, "Bertie, part of this money is yours, because you told me the things today that he asked me about. Remember?"

A cat ran out on the sidewalk. Bertie yelled at it, "Pussy-cat, pussy-cat, where have you been?"

The cat didn't answer. It just looked startled and ran off, for all Bertie knew, to London, to visit the queen.

* * * * *

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That same night, after Bart's radio triumph, Bertie was once more comfortably anchored on the couch, reading. But he was troubled. In the past few days, several people had made remarks about his mind, and his memory. First, Mr. Konka, and then the radio announcer. Maybe something was wrong with his mind. It was hard for him to concentrate on his lessons, and he wasn't remembering so well any more. Maybe he'd been hurt by a head kick in football, or jarred once too much in boxing. Bartie was frightened. Could it be that his brain was covered with scars, and was permanently impaired? What could be done about it? It must be pretty bad if people were noticing.

Bertie took up his German grammar and tried to work, but he couldn't keep his mind on the work. He was too occupied with worrying. He threw the book aside and reached for a magazine. Suddenly his heart skipped a beat. There, before him, was a full-page ad that seemed to have been written expressly for him. It showed a worried man sitting at a table, head in hands, unable to concentrate, and above him was a finger pointing from the page at the reader, and the big black words, ARE YOU A MAN WITH A HOP-TOAD MIND?

Bertie lowered the magazine and considered the question. He held his breath and listened. Yes, he was sure of it. Something was jumping in his brain. There were strange noises in his head. Something that beat and throbbed, like . . . *like the hopping of a toad.*

Bertie moved closer to the light and read the ad. Every word hit home. "Are you unable to concentrate?" the advertisement demanded. "Do you daydream, and have trouble focusing your attention on your problems? Do you think of a thousand things at once? Are your problems too numerous for you to

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cope with? Do you sit helpless, because you cannot BRING YOUR BRAIN TO BEAR on the problem at hand? Are you the man with the hop-toad mind?"

"Yes," Bertie breathed soundlessly. "Yes."

He let the magazine fall to his knees. There it was, in black and white. That was his trouble. He was a man with a hop-toad mind. He had all the symptoms, all. Not just three or four, but all. He picked up the magazine again, looking for a solution to his problem.

"WE CAN HELP YOU" the advertisement continued. "Our course of training will build a new mind for you. Concentration and clear thinking will be simple for you. Success in business, studies and love will become yours quickly, once you have become the master of your brain. Enroll at once in the MASTER MIND INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, and in six months you will be able to CONCENTRATE, THINK CLEARLY, and be the absolute MASTER OF YOUR BRAIN."

Bertie got his mother's scissors and cut the coupon out of the ad. He filled in his name and address before he saw a line in small print which had escaped him before. It read, "Enclosed find () check () money order for twenty-five dollars for a COMPLETE course in mental development. If I am not more than satisfied with the results, I will have my money cheerfully refunded."

Bertie put down his pen and looked sadly at the coupon. Twenty-five dollars was a huge sum of money. Still, it wasn't much if it meant saving his mind, and developing his mental powers to the point where success would naturally become his. But how to get the twenty-five dollars? There was one way . . . a long gamble, but worth it. If he tried hard enough, he might do it, and then he would be able to send away for the course.

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He was a drowning man clutching at a straw, all right, but it might be the straw that would help save the camel's brain. Bertie chuckled when he thought of how Mr. Konka would look on Monday when he heard that Bertie was entering the Language Department recitation contest. And the whole school would be surprised when he won it, too. Bertie put aside the magazine and reached for his German book. He would find a good poem, not too long, and he'd get in there and fight.

Several minutes later, Mr. Poddle walked into the living room and looked casually at Bertie. He took a step forward, stopped, and let the newspaper fall from his hand. Then he took off his glasses, polished them, examined them closely, and put them on again. And when he looked at Bertie again, he saw the same thing.

"Bertram!" Mr. Poddle said sharply.

Bertie looked up. "Yes?"

"What is it, my boy? You can tell your father. I'll forgive you."

"I don't understand," Bertie said. "Tell you what?"

"Bertram," Mr. Poddle said, "I may be a stern father at times, but I try to be understanding. Now, you know what night this is?"

"Saturday night," Bertie said wonderingly.

"Yes. And you are home. Not only that, I see a detective magazine on the floor, and a textbook in your hand. What's the matter, son?"

"Nothing's the matter," Bertie said, wondering in his turn what ailed his father. "I'm just studying my German. I'm going to enter the Language Department recitation contest, and I have to learn a German poem. I've chosen one called Sieg-

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fried's Sword. It goes, '*Jung Siegfried war ein stolzer Knab*',
Ging von . . .'"

"Bertram," Mr. Poddle said hastily, "What made you decide to study German? Weren't there any other languages that appealed to you? Spanish is very useful. Take our relations with Latin-America. I was just saying to your mother tonight, that what we ought to do about Argentina is . . ."

"The other choice was Latin," Bertie said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS a fine evening, and Bertie Poddle was happy. He swung along whistling cheerfully, and the fingers of his right hand, sunk deep in the pocket of his jacket, curled lovingly around two dimes and a nickel.

"Two dimes and a nickel, yo-ho, yo-ho," Bertie sang aloud in what he fondly imagined to be a manly baritone. "To Frubbler's Pharmacy I will go. Go . . . gooo . . . goooo . . . goooooo . . . goooougggg . . ." He couldn't make the last deep note.

It was a night of strange and wonderful freedom. Bart was home, and hadn't been allowed to tag along, and at last Bertie had memorized every word of *Siegfried's Schwert*. At last he could relax, and not have to worry about being over-trained for the contest.

"*Jung Siegfried war ein stolzer Knab*" Bertie sang to the tune of Old MacDonald Had a Farm. "*Ging von des Vater's Burg herab*, e-i, e-i, o!"

Bertie approached Frubbler's with his order already planned. "Two full scoops of ice cream, my good man. I said full, Mr. Frubbler, and you just dropped a slab of vanilla the size of a pin head back in the freezer. Now chocolate syrup, please. Thick, delicious chocolate syrup, and careful about spilling.

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And a sprinkling of crushed nut meats, if you don't mind, and a covering of marshmallow, and a cherry."

Bertie turned smartly as he reached the drug store, making a square, military turn, and he marched into the light and brightness of Frubbler's where there was warmth and comfort, and music from the juke box, and ice cream, and Ted Dale, and Marcia, ah, Marcia, and good old Wiggins Hackenlooper, and . . . Hyacinth O'Houlihan.

The song choked and died in Bertie's throat. His fingers allowed the coins in his pocket to fall with a dull clink, his step lost its bounce and vigor, and his vision of a soul-stirring confection gave way to a vision of a rope with a hangman's knot, and a noose the size of Hyacinth's new hat.

Bertie stepped quietly into Frubbler's, looking for a place to sit by his friends. There was one vacant stool at the counter where they sat — between Ted and Hyacinth.

"Howdy all," Bertie said with forced cheerfulness as he casually sat between Ted and Hyacinth. "Watchmen, what of the night?"

"Hello, stranger," Ted said. "Where have you been hiding?"

"Been studying," Bertie said. "I'm entering the Language Department contest. I'm doing a poem in German. *Jung Siegfried war . . .*"

"I'm in it too," Marcia said. "With Latin. *Olim Pluto, rex Orci . . .*"

"I hope you win," Bertie said, and then remembering the course he had to send for, he added lamely, "Second prize, that is. I'm after first money."

"I think I'll enter too," Wiggins said. "I'll recite the poem about ackJay and illJay. Maybe I'll win."

Hyacinth, her red hair falling over her shoulders, and look-

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ing skinny as the straw she stabbed into a glass of soda, suddenly turned to Bertie. "Poddle," she said, and Bertie winced, because it sounded like someone saying Rover, "Poddle, I didn't know you were a student. Are you fond of poetry?"

"Yes," Bertie said, thinking of the poems he had written about Marcia, but which he had never dared show her. "I like poetry. If it rhymes, that is."

"Well," Hyacinth said. "Maybe I've been wrong about you. How would you like to be friends?"

"Fine," Bertie said eagerly. "I'd like that. I'm sorry about the band."

"Let bygones be bygones, and sleeping dogs lie," Hyacinth said. "Shake."

Hyacinth put out her hand, and Bertie grasped it. A sudden wild plan flashed in his mind, and Bertie succumbed to temptation. Under the guise of giving a firm handshake, he squeezed with all the pressure he could muster.

Trying to squeeze Hyacinth's hand was like trying to squeeze the prongs on a metal rake. Hyacinth's bony fingers sank into the softer flesh of Bertie's hand, and a moment later she was grinding the bones of his knuckles together, and it was like gears clashing.

Bertie held fast and tried to out-squeeze her. The sweat stood out on his forehead as he tried to overcome the pressure of those relentless fingers, but he couldn't bring the strength of his arm into his hand.

Hyacinth smiled innocently as she slowly twisted her hand, and Bertie, trying to make his grimace of pain come out like a carefree grin, slid off the stool, went over on his back, on the floor.

Hyacinth released her grip. "Frubbler," she ordered, "bring

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this fallen warrior a glass of soda. Make it a pink soda." Hyacinth spun a nickel on the counter and walked toward the door. "See you later, Hercules," she called back to Bertie.

Bertie got up, his face crimson. He was so shamed and humiliated that he dared not look at his friends. He wished he could sink through the floor, fall dead, or disappear miraculously. He climbed back on his seat, his hand sore, and his heart dead within him.

But his friends weren't laughing at him. Wiggins, the powerful, bull-like Wiggins, held out a hand for Bertie to look at. His hand was still marked with little red streaks. "You never should have tried to out-squeeze little Hyacinth," Wiggins said. "She had me on my back about ten minutes ago. She knows some secret squeeze an uncle back from India taught her. My hand still hurts."

"She did that?" Bertie asked happily.

"It's something I'll never live down," Wiggins replied gloomily.

"I wish Hyacinth would stop trying to be Superman," Ted said. "You never can tell when she's going to get mad about something and start fighting. What's wrong with her?"

"Even if you licked her fair and square in a fight," Wiggins observed, "what would it get you? Nobody wants to run up a string of kayos over girls."

"You boys are the reason Hyacinth acts the way she does," Marcia said. "You don't treat her like a girl but like another fellow."

"She doesn't act like a girl," Ted argued. "Always wanting to hit somebody in the eye, or something like that."

"You've never given her the chance to be nice," Marcia continued. "I know her better than you do, and I know what

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her trouble is. She feels self-conscious because she's so skinny, and her hair is so red, and she tries to make up for it by blustering. I'll bet none of you has ever asked her for a date, and neither has any other boy in town. That's why she acts like she hates you all."

"Ask her for a date?" Wiggins bellowed, rolling his eyes in horror. "I'd rather take a cobra."

"Where could you take her?" Ted added. "To the zoo?"

Bertie was too overcome by the thought to speak, and gulped his pink soda without making any comment.

"One of you ought to ask her for a date," Marcia said. "It would make all the difference in the world in the way she acts."

"Who would you suggest?" Ted asked. "You wouldn't sacrifice your own brother . . ."

"The three of you draw straws," Marcia said firmly. "I'll break them and hold. The short straw asks Hyacinth to go to the movies this Saturday night." She broke a straw in three pieces and hid them in her hand. "Come on, Wiggins, you first."

Wiggins chose carefully, and sat back. Ted drew next, frowning at his straw. Bertie took the last one.

"Put them down," Marcia said. "We'll see who . . ."

"Long!" Wiggins bellowed triumphantly.

"Long!" Ted shouted. "Saved!"

All three turned on Bertie, who sat staring at the fatal straw. "Congratulations," laughed Wiggins, "and all the good luck you'll certainly need."

"Nice to have known you, Bertie," said Ted.

"Don't be silly," Marcia snapped at them. She turned to Bertie, who looked at her with big calf eyes. "Hyacinth will be thrilled, Bertie. Call her right away."

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"Perhaps a formal note . . ." Bertie began, searching for a way out.

"No. If you delay it will be too late. Call her now."

Bertie slid off the stool and walked to the phone booth like a barefoot man walking into a fiery furnace. Head erect, shoulders back, hoping like mad Hyacinth would refuse, Bertie advanced to the fatal instrument. He dropped in a nickel and dialed her number.

While Bertie was telephoning, Ted said, "It's too bad we can't think of some quick way to do something that would help Bertie out. If we could do something to make him seem manly, and heroic, Hyacinth would like that. Bertie's such a good guy, she'd like him if she gave herself the chance."

"I know," Wiggins said eagerly. "Saturday night I'll put on a fake moustache and insult Hyacinth when she's with Bertie. We'll have it arranged for him to knock me down."

"What if Hyacinth swings first — which she'll do," asked Marcia.

"That's right," Wiggins agreed soberly. "Too dangerous."

"She must be afraid of *something*," Ted insisted. "Everybody is."

"Nothing I know about," Marcia shook her pretty head — "and I knew her well."

"How about snakes?" Ted asked hopefully. "Is she afraid of snakes?"

"Is Bertie?" Marcia countered.

"I don't think so. I never heard him say anything about it. Look, I've got a plan. There's an old man on the edge of town who keeps snakes. We'll go get a blacksnake from him, and Saturday night, when Bertie comes out of Hyacinth's house with her, we'll have the snake parked on the porch. Bertie'll

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get rid of the snake and Hyacinth will think he's a hero.

"Will the snake oblige you by staying put?" Marcia asked, giggling a little at the thought of what would happen.

"Sure it's still pretty cold for snakes, and it'll be sluggish. It won't escape, and no one will be hurt. I think it's the thing to do."

"We'll ask Bertie," said Wiggins.

"No. Not a word to him. He might spoil the show. He's not a very good actor, and he might give the whole thing away. We'll just sound him out indirectly, and go ahead with our plan alone."

They didn't have to ask Bertie if Hyacinth had accepted his offer. The look on Bertie's face was enough to make Wiggins order a soda, pay for it, and give it to Bertie after taking only a small sip to see if it was good. "Bertie," Wiggins said, "you ought to get a medal for this."

"The Heeble Gold Letter, at least," Ted added.

"I'll probably qualify for the Purple Heart before Sunday morning," Bertie murmured sadly, accepting the free soda from Wiggins and sipping at it in quiet grief.

"Bertie," Marcia asked, "What do you think about snakes?"

"Snakes?" Bertie had trouble repressing a shudder as he uttered the word.

"Yes. Are you afraid of them?"

Bertie saw Marcia's lovely eyes looking into his own. Admit fear in front of this beautiful creature? Never! Bertie permitted himself a small falsehood. "No, I'm not afraid of them," he said aloud, and finished the sentence in his mind, *when they're in the zoo and I'm on the outside*. "Why do you ask, Marcia?"

"I was just wondering," she replied. "So Hyacinth accepted?"

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"I call for her at eight. She wanted to know what kind of game I had lost that it was the penalty for. I had time getting around that."

"You'll get along all right," Wiggins promised.

"Sure," Ted added confidently. "You'll probably have a lot of fun."

Bertie wondered about their sudden optimism. He decided they were happy because it wasn't their worry.

Ted and Wiggins went over to find a record they liked on the juke box. Left alone with Marcia, Bertie sat quietly for a moment, and then said in a low tone, "I don't mind taking Hyacinth Saturday, because I lost. But I really don't want to take her."

"Why not?" Marcia asked, looking at Bertie and knowing very well why not.

Bertie lowered his eyes, blushing. "Because," he said painfully. "You know why," he added, squirming, and wishing he'd never brought up the subject. "I just wanted you to know I'm only doing this because you asked me to."

"I think it's very nice of you," Marcia said. "It makes me think more of you."

"Does it?" Bertie asked hungrily. "Marcia . . ."

"Uhuh?"

"I wanted to ask you . . . that is . . . well, you know the Spring Dance is coming, and I sort of wondered if . . . I'm not a very good dancer . . . I mean you know that . . . but if you can . . . would you go with me?"

"I'd like to," Marcia answered regretfully, "but I can't. I've promised someone else."

Bertie tried to smile away his disappointment. "I thought I was asking early," he said as lightly as he could.

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"Wilbur asked me last fall."

"Wilbur . . ." Bertie choked over the name. "And you said . . . yes?"

"I had to. I . . . He did something for me . . . a favor, and I promised then. I'm sorry, Bertie."

"It's all right," Bertie said. "Guess you can go with anyone you want to. And if you promised . . ."

"Why don't you ask Hyacinth?" Marcia asked brightly.

"Maybe I won't even go," Bertie said. "I don't care so much about dancing anyway." He sipped his soda, and even in the crush of his disappointment, he found time to wonder why girls who wouldn't go with you themselves always suggested you go out with their homely friends, but never mentioned the good-looking ones.

* * * * *

At the appointed hour on Saturday night Bertie Poddle presented himself at the O'Houlihan door. Bertie was dressed neatly and soberly, as for a funeral. Mrs. O'Houlihan opened the door. "So, you're the young man who is calling for Hyacinth, are you?"

"Yes ma'am," Bertie replied politely.

"Have a good time," Mrs. O'Houlihan said. "And watch out for her left."

"Yes ma'am, I know. Thank you."

Mrs. O'Houlihan, who was on her way to visit some friends, dabbed at her eyes as she left the house. "Ah me," Bertie heard her sigh, "my little baby is growing up. Here only yesterday

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she was throwin' rocks at policemen, and now she's goin' to the cowboy pictures with a fine young man."

Bertie went inside and sat down in the living room. He sat on the edge of a straight chair, jumping nervously every time he heard a sound. After several minutes he heard Hyacinth coming down the stairs. It was too late to run. Bertie stood up and waited for his fate like a man.

Hyacinth came into the room and Bertie almost fell down. Her hair was not only combed, it was done up quite gracefully, and that which reached her shoulders was like a shower of red gold. She wore a green wool three-piece suit, and shoes with moderately high heels. As she came in, Bertie caught a pleasant whiff of perfume, and he noticed that she had a small handkerchief in her hand. He had expected a baseball bat.

"Well," Hyacinth demanded, "what are you staring at?"

"I . . . I think you look very nice tonight," Bertie stammered, for once getting a compliment out straight. "That's a very nice dress."

"It's a suit," Hyacinth corrected him. But she was pleased, and she smiled at Bertie. He was relieved, and smiled back.

"Shall we be off to the cinema?" Hyacinth asked. "I believe we have our choice between seeing 'Blazing Sixguns' and 'Blood on the Cactus.' Which do you prefer?"

"Either one," Bertie said. "How about you?"

"'Blazing Sixguns' sounds interesting," Hyacinth said, speaking in an affected through-the-nose manner, and obviously quite pleased with everything. "You have your car outside?"

"I'm sorry, no." Bertie continued, getting into the spirit of the game. "But I ordered two gin-rickshaws."

"That's too bad," Hyacinth said. "I never touch intoxicating beverages."

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They went to the front door, which Bertie opened, and then he stood aside for Hyacinth to go through. She looked at him with some surprise, then went ahead. While this was going on, a long, black, shiny, sluggishly cold character was dumped from a sack on the porch, and two boy figures disappeared around the side of the house.

Hyacinth stepped out on the porch, which was illuminated by an overhead light, then turned to Bertie. "Did you bring this for me?" she asked.

"What?" Bertie asked, closing the door.

"That." Hyacinth pointed to the snake that lay glistening darkly in the light.

Bertie looked at the snake. At the same moment the snake raised his head and looked at Bertie.

Bertie leaped back. "Watch out, Hyacinth!" Bertie forgot that he had closed the door, and tried to run back into the house. He rammed into the door, but it didn't give way.

"It's only a snake," Hyacinth said. Stepping forward, she reached down and seized the snake behind the head. As she lifted it, the snake whipped several black coils around her arm. "A pretty little blacksnake," Hyacinth said. "What is 'oo doin' out in 'dis ol' col' night, 'ittle serpent?" she crooned. "Look, Bertie. He's all lonely and lost." Hyacinth held the snake out toward Bertie. "Take him and put him in my snake box in the kitchen, will you, Bertie?"

As Hyacinth thrust the snake at him, Bertie leaped back again, striking his head on the door knocker. He slid to a sitting position, counting stars. He put his hand up, and when he took it down, there just was a little trace of blood on it. "I'm wounded," he muttered thickly. "He bit me. The snake bit me."

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"Oh, come on in the kitchen," Hyacinth said. "I'll fix your fat head, and then we can go to the movies."

Hyacinth put the snake in a box she had in the kitchen, and looked at Bertie's head. "Just a scratch," she said. "I'll fix it." She daubed it with iodine while Bertie gritted his teeth, and then she put a couple of Band-Aids on. "There," Hyacinth said. "You're fixed."

"How can I get them off?" Bertie complained. "They're stuck to my hair."

"That's your problem," Hyacinth told him. "Now let's get go . . ." Hyacinth stopped, gasped, and shrieked. Bertie's blood ran cold. Whatever could scare Hyacinth . . .

"Ugh, a mouse!" Hyacinth yelled, jumping on a chair. "Get him, Bertie. I hate the dirty little things. Ugh! Save me!"

Bertie staggered to his feet and crossed the kitchen. "Where?"

"There!" Hyacinth picked up a sugar bowl, and closing her eyes, she hurled it at the mouse. The bowl skimmed within inches of Bertie's head, and he leaped for cover. As fate would have it, Bertie leaped to the spot where the confused mouse cringed, and a moment later a dish sailed across the room and exploded between Bertie and the mouse. The mouse took off, with Bertie close behind, while Hyacinth sent a rapid fire of kitchen objects flying after them, all the while wailing and calling upon Bertie to save her.

Bertie ducked another platter and started for the door, figuring it was time to save his own life before saving hers. The frightened mouse had the same idea, and tried to cut across in front of Bertie. It was a wrong move for the mouse. Bertie's foot swept under him, and the mouse sailed through the air, hit the wall, and fell stunned to the floor. Bertie picked him up by the tail and threw him out the back door.



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Hyacinth jumped down from the chair and advanced toward Bertie, a tender smile on her face. "You saved me," she murmured softly. "You saved me. Now you can take me to the movies. I need to hear some shooting to calm my nerves."

And all the way to the theatre, and through the movie, Hyacinth clung tenderly to Bertie's arm.

Bertie's failure to save Hyacinth from the snake was the last that Ted and Wiggins stayed to see. When he failed in that, they went back to Frubbler's, to dabble in ice cream, and wonder what would happen to Bertie now. And, since their efforts had been wasted, they were a little disgusted with the way Bertie had acted.

"She'll make his life miserable from now on," Wiggins said in a gloomy voice. "And after all we did for him."

"He'll never live it down." Ted shook his head.

At that moment, the picture show being over, in walked Bertie Poddle with Hyacinth still clinging to his arm.

Wiggins and Ted eyed them in astonishment. First, there was the way Hyacinth was dressed, and looked. Second, Bertie was still with her.

"She's holding him up," Wiggins declared.

"Poor Bertie," Ted added. "She's marching him in here to make his disgrace public."

The two boys looked on wonderingly as Bertie and Hyacinth sat at the counter and ordered sodas. Then, boys being what they are, Wiggins leaned toward Bertie and whispered, "Snake."

Bertie choked and almost fell over backwards, but Hyacinth acted quickly. She grabbed Wiggins by the hand and twisted him to the floor with her secret grip. "I heard that," she said fiercely. "And I suspected you all the time. You're jealous,

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and you want to break me and Bertie up. I'm warning you, Wiggins, you leave my pal Bertie alone."

Hyacinth returned to her place, and regained her demure manner. "There, Bertie, you just drink your soda. And if any of these lugs try to make trouble for you, just let me know. I'm not letting anybody push my little hero around."

Bertie quivered as though he had been lashed with a whip, but he only nodded. Hyacinth was watching him closely, and he didn't dare make a false move. Later, while Ted and Wiggins stared in disbelief, Bertie left Frubbler's with Hyacinth, and she was still clinging to his arm.



The next afternoon, as Ted Dale was leaving his house, he saw Bertie Poddle coming down the street looking downcast.

"What's the matter?" Ted asked, going out to meet Bertie. "I thought you'd be happy, now that Hyacinth is your friend. Has she turned against you?"

Bertie looked at Ted with unhappy eyes. "Worse than that," Bertie answered in a hopeless voice. "When I left her last night she said that I was her hero, and I was going to stay her hero, and if she saw me look at another girl, she'd scratch my eyes out. You're my friend," Bertie finished desperately. "Won't you help me think of a way to get Hyacinth disgusted with me again?"

"I'd like to, Bertie," Ted parried, "but she might get mad at me too, and I hope to pitch for the Heeble team this spring. I can't risk getting my arm broken."

"Thanks anyway," Bertie said. "Maybe I can figure out something."

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"Coming to the hills with us this afternoon?" Ted asked. "I'm taking my .22, and we're going to do some shooting."

"I have to see Hyacinth first. I promised I'd read poetry to her today."

"See you later, then. So long, Bertie."

"So long, Ted." Bertie went on with bowed head.

When Bertie reached Hyacinth's house, she was waiting for him with a book in her hand. When he saw that she didn't intend to throw it, Bertie relaxed.

"Uh, Hyacinth," Bertie began hesitantly, "the fellows are going out this afternoon to . . ."

"Let them go. You promised to read poetry to me."

"Aw, Hyacinth, I don't . . ."

"Bertie!"

"But I . . ."

"Read!"

"All right," Bertie said unhappily, freeing his arm. As he picked up the book, he heard the sound of dogs barking as they followed boys to the hills for shooting. Bertie cleared his throat, and with a final sigh for lost freedom, he began to read:

"Bold Prince Cuthbert on a snow white steed

Spurred through the forest at breakneck speed,

While his Princess was waiting in a castle high . . ."

Hyacinth leaned back, closed her eyes, and smiled. After Bertie had read for several minutes, he stopped. Hyacinth opened her eyes. "Well?"

"You know," Bertie said, "I'm reciting a German poem in the contest next week. Would you like to hear it? I haven't had much chance to say it aloud, and I want to win the prize."

"Certainly I want to hear it," Hyacinth said. "That Cuthbert sounds like a jer . . . he's not very interesting anyway."

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"*Siegfried's Schwert*," Bertie intoned sonorously. "*Jung Sieg . . .*"

"Bertie . . ."

"What?"

"Who are you taking to the Spring Dance? You *are* going, aren't you?"

"I hadn't intended to," Bertie said, overwhelmed by sorrow and envy as he thought of Wilbur taking Marcia.

"I think you ought to go," Hyacinth advised pointedly. "You ought to go and take some nice girl. Yes, Bertie, I think you ought to ask *some nice girl*."

"Hyacinth," Bertie said gallantly, taking the hint, "would you care to go to the Spring Dance with me?"

"Certainly," Hyacinth replied. "Why, this is a surprise. I never dreamed you were going to ask me."

"I didn't either," Bertie muttered.

"What was that?" she asked sharply.

"I was talking in German," Bertie said hastily. "My poem. '*Jung Siegfried war ein stolzer Knab', Ging von des Vater's . . .*'"

"Lovely," Hyacinth breathed. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Bertie admitted. "I never translated it. I just memorized the German words . . . '*des Vater's Burg herab. Wollt' rastern nisht . . . nickt . . . in Vater's Haus. . .*'"

CHAPTER NINE

BERTIE PODDLE dipped his spoon into the bowl of oatmeal before him and took a small taste. He put down his spoon and picked up a slice of toast, and took a small bite. He put down the toast and picked up a glass of milk and took a small sip. He put down the glass of milk and sighed. "May I be excused?" he asked his father. "I think I'll start for school."

"Yes," Mr. Poddle replied without looking up. "Do you have a clean handkerchief? What time is it, anyway? Would you stop at the jeweler's on your way home and pick up my watch? How are you making out in your Latin?" He turned the page of his newspaper and started muttering at the editorials.

"I take German," Bertie said, getting up from his chair.

"Yes, of course," Mr. Poddle said. "Imbecile!" he sneered.

"Me, Father?" Bertie quavered, wondering what he had done.

"No, not you. The idiot who writes these editorials. Listen to what he says about the municipal bond issue. You listen too, Bart."

"I'm a little late for school now. . . ." Bertie said.

"This is more important than school. This is life, Bertram. Listen: 'In our opinion, the projected municipal bond issue does not take cognizance of the assessed valuations of income property versus the normal depreciation of amortized bonded expenditures.' What do you think of that? Do you see the fallacy

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of that reasoning, Bertram? Do you know what that means for the taxpayer, Bart?"

Bertie and Bart exchanged looks, and Bart rolled his eyes.

"In the second paragraph," Mr. Poddle went on, "this incapable, unlearned, ink-stained dabbler in . . ."

"Why Bertram," Mrs. Poddle exclaimed, coming in from the kitchen. "You've hardly touched your breakfast. Don't you feel well?"

"I feel all right," Bertie said heartily. "I just wasn't very hungry this morning."

"Eh?" Mr. Poddle shouted, listening to every other word. "Isn't the food in this house good enough for you? If you don't like the way we provide meals, perhaps you'd be happier eating in a restaurant. And you needn't come back complaining about your ulcers. What's the matter, are you sick? Call Dr. Tronsit. Where do you hurt?"

"I don't hurt," Bertie protested. "I'm not hungry this morning. Guess I'm a little nervous. The contest takes place today. I have to win the twenty-five dollar first prize."

"There's nothing to be nervous about," Mr. Poddle declared. "Speak your piece and claim the money. If you know it, and speak it well, you'll win. If you aren't given the prize, I'll speak to the principal. If the teachers gang up on a boy of mine to deprive him of a prize he has rightfully won, I have the right as a taxpayer to know why!"

Bertie looked pleadingly at his mother who motioned for him to go on to school, and indicated she would explain fully to Mr. Poddle. Bertie smiled his thanks and went off quietly to get his books and leave for school. Now that the contest was at hand, he felt extremely nervous. He tried to remember his poem, but it refused to come to mind. He tried harder, but

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all he could feel in his head were strange throbbings, like the jumping of hop-toads. He was getting worse all the time. He had to win the money and send away for the course before it was too late!

Bertie walked to school head down, moodily kicking at all small stones in his path. Everything seemed to be running against him. He felt uncertain about the contest, Marcia was going to the Spring Dance with Wilbur, and most depressing of all, it seemed certain he would never win his blue H as a Heeble athlete.

After his failures in football and boxing, he had resigned himself to the fact that his place in the world of sport was sitting in the cheap seats, cheering the teams to victory. But suddenly, as he walked to school, he felt as though his chest would itch forever unless it could be covered with a large blue H, the sign and symbol of athletic achievement in the cause of the Theodore F. Heeble High School.

The outlook was bleak. The only remaining sports at Heeble were track and baseball. Track he dismissed without a second thought, but his thoughts lingered on baseball. Bertie knew the boys who would be going out for the Heeble baseball team, and as he evaluated them, his heart saddened. Position after position was held by someone Bertie knew to be his superior in catching, fielding, and throwing.

Walking with his head down, Bertie stepped over a small white handkerchief lying on the sidewalk. He went on two or three steps, then halted, went back and picked up the little white square of cloth. In one corner were the initials M.D. Bertie's heart skipped a beat as he saw the initials of the girl who was the heroine of all his imaginary adventures. He was about to stuff the handkerchief in his pocket when he looked

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up and saw Marcia walking slowly toward school, about a hundred yards ahead of him. In another instant Bertie was pounding toward her at top speed, carrying the handkerchief aloft like a knight spurring to the joust.

Marcia turned around as she heard and felt the thunder of heavy feet. Bertie, his chubby face aglow, his head held high, dashed up with the handkerchief held out at arm's length.

"Here," Bertie panted as his feet came to a pavement-slapping halt. "Yours."

"Thank you, Bertie," Marcia said, taking the handkerchief. And as Bertie fell in step with her, still breathing heavily, she said, "I didn't know you could run."

"Huh?" Bertie gasped. "Why not? I'm human."

"I mean so fast," Marcia said tactfully.

"Fast? Was I really fast?" Bertie was suddenly all ears.

"It looked very fast to me," Marcia said. And knowing Bertie's hopes about winning a letter, she added, "You ought to try out for the track team."

"No, ho-ho-ho," Bertie scoffed. "I'm not that fast."

"I was talking with Coach Martin yesterday," Marcia said. "He told me they needed more men out for track."

"Yeah? For what events?"

"All of them. Every running department needs people. And field events, too. Maybe you could win a place with the shot put, or discus throw."

"Golly, I never thought of track," Bertie said. "It just goes to show you, doesn't it?" In his mind he was already seeing himself winning the hundred yard dash, establishing a new world record for the distance. Track sounded like just the sport for him. It wasn't like football, where you had to remember so many intricate plays, and take a beating in the bargain, and

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it wasn't like basketball, where you had to be quick on your feet and have a good eye. All you had to do in track was run faster than somebody else. And he could run. Marcia had noticed that, and he was in street clothes. "I'll report for practice tomorrow," he said. "I'd go today, but I have to be at the contest."

"I thought I'd never memorize my Latin selection," Marcia confessed, smoothing her hair with her hand. "But I finally did. How about you?"

"I knew it pretty well," Bertie said. "But it's kind of gotten away from me this morning."

"It will come back to you," Marcia smiled. "You've got stage fright early, that's all."

"I'll have it by this afternoon," Bertie muttered grimly. "I *have* to."

They separated in the hall, and Bertie went to his locker. While he fumbled with his key, he tried to go over the poem in his mind, but all he could remember were the first two words of the first line.

* * * * *

Bertie Poddle sat smiling confidently as he watched and listened to the tortured progress of a fellow contestant struggling with an anecdote in French. He was a tall, gangly boy, with a prominent Adam's apple that bobbed furiously every time he swallowed, which was every other second. He stood swaying in front of the audience of contestants and judges, his eyes focused prayerfully on the ceiling, and blurted his way through the story.

"Deuce aytrangers see promenaïtt surly boredey low," the

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tall boy stammered, gulping. Bertie looked at Marcia and smiled tolerantly, and she smiled back. Bertie looked at the tall boy with an expression of interest, although he could not understand a word that was being said. No Frenchman would have either, so Bertie is not to be thought of unkindly, and his smiling incomprehension was even shared by the teacher who had taught the tall boy his selection.

"*Mezzan face, sour lotter board,*" the tall boy struggled on. "*Ill-ya avatossie oan chin dee . . . uh . . . dee . . . ah . . . uh . . . tearnuve.*"

Bertie examined his fingernails, polished them gently on his sweater, and thought to himself, "*Siegfried's Schwert.*"

The tall boy eventually finished and stepped down with a great gasp of relief. He returned to his seat and slumped into it, thinking about his performance, and looking quite doleful as he re-lived it. He promised himself never to get caught in a similar situation again, thought several bad English words about French, and looked at the efforts of the next contender for the twenty-five dollar prize.

The next to recite was not difficult to watch. It was Marcia. She walked to the front of the room with an easy, composed stride, faced the audience, and with her pretty, expressive face giving full meaning to the words, she told the story of Pluto and Proserpine in a clear, sweet voice. Bertie, hanging on every word, gazed at her with such obvious devotion in his eyes that had Marcia looked at him, it is probable she would have been disconcerted. "*Pluto Proserpinam in matrimonium duxit,*" Marcia said with clarity and understanding expression. "*Nunc Proserpina erat regina mortuorum.*"

Bertie's feelings were mixed as she continued. He was proud that she was doing so well, but it also meant that his chance of

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winning the prize was being blasted. If he had to lose, he felt, and so be forever a man with a hop-toad mind, he could think of no one better to win over him than Marcia. For secretly, he would share that victory.

Marcia concluded her selection and returned to her seat. The teachers who were judging the contest put their heads together and whispered, nodding in agreement. Then it was Bertie's turn to speak.

As Bertie walked to the front of the room and turned, he saw the teachers regarding him intently, and with some surprise. The French teacher looked questioningly at the Latin teacher, and the Latin teacher shrugged and looked at Mr. Konka, who was staring at Bertie as though he really couldn't believe it was Bertie who stood before them and announced in a trembling voice the title of his selection.

"*S-Siegfried's Schwert*," Bertie said, and licked his lips. He looked at Marcia, and she smiled. Heartened, Bertie plunged into the poem. He spoke the first two lines easily, and carelessly. The next two lines seemed longer, and he suddenly had the feeling of seeing the poem stretch away into the stratosphere, couplet after couplet of strange, guttural words, that would take him forever to recite, if he could remember them all. He speeded up a bit.

"*'Wollt rastern nish . . . nick . . .'*" Bertie cast a terrified look at Mr. Konka, who scowled back. "*'nicht in Vater's Haus!'*" Bertie bleated, and drawing a deep, noisy breath, he plunged after the third line.

At the fifth couplet, Bertie found the poem getting away from him. He clasped his hands behind his back, rocked on his toes, cleared his throat, rolled his eyes, and shook all over. There was a way he could remember, he felt. If he could get

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the swing of it. . . . It came to him, suddenly. His habit of singing the lines to the tune of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm." It wasn't exactly proper, but it was the only way he could finish.

Bertie took another deep breath, closed his eyes, and to the astonishment of everyone in the room, he trumpeted,

"*'Und als er ging in den finstern Wald'*" (Hoarse whisper, "E-i-e-i-o") "*Kam er an eine Schmiede bald,*" e-i, e-i, o."

The students gasped, the teachers turned red, and Mr. Konkka, his eyes bulging, made choking sounds in his throat. But Bertie, his eyes tightly shut, his hands clenched, rushed ahead, half-reciting, half-singing, hoarsely whispering his "e-i, e-i, o" after each line.

The further along Bertie went, the faster his tempo became. The lines and lines of unfamiliar words he had memorized came back to him with a rush, and he could not speak them quickly enough. Faster and faster came the torrent of words, and Bertie, stopping only to draw long, shuddering breaths, charged into the last couplet so fast it came out "*'Nunschlag'-ich wie ein andrer Held Die Reise und Drachen in Wald und Feld.'*"

As the last words bubbled past his lips, Bertie started toward his seat, reaching it as the final, thunderous, explosive German word popped out of his mouth, and he sat down heavily, exhausted, panting, and feeling weak as a kitten. It was over!

By the time Bertie regained his breath and his composure, and was able to hold his head up and look around, smiling agreeably at his fellow-contestants, the teachers had agreed on the prize-winners. The head of the Language Department, a gray-ing, thin man, came forward to make the awards.

"Wish . . . congratulate . . . all . . . interest . . . languages," he said indistinctly, and clearing his throat, he announced the prizes.

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"Third prize of five dollars, won by Lorraine Gilotti."

Lorraine went forward, blushing happily, and claimed her money. Bertie applauded loudly.

"Second prize, ten dollars, won by Harry Ludwig."

Harry Ludwig walked up to receive his money. He was a dark, serious boy, with a lock of black hair falling over his forehead. Bertie beat his hands together in hearty congratulation.

"First prize of twenty-five dollars. . . ." The students leaned forward in their seats as the teacher paused for dramatic effect. Bertie's hands felt sweaty, and his collar unbearably tight. ". . . won by Marcia Dale." Marcia went forward to collect her money, and Bertie applauded dutifully while the hop-toad in his head jumped madly. There was nothing to do now but wait for his mind to go to pieces, all because he didn't have twenty-five dollars to save himself by taking the necessary course. Bertie thought of a movie he had seen recently in which the hero had lost his mind, and been saved by the heroine. It couldn't happen to him — Marcia wasn't a doctor.

There was a general stir as the students began getting up to leave the room. But the department head held up his hand and motioned for them to sit down again.

"We have one more prize," he said in his dry, cracking voice. "Just . . . decided . . . give." He looked up at the students, cleared his throat, looked at his watch, and spoke. "We have just decided to award a special prize of five dollars to the student who, in our opinion, showed the most progress in his language studies this year. We were convinced by Mr. Konka that one of his students should be awarded the money. He tells us that even he did not know it was possible to speak German so quickly, and is quite positive that a world record

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for speed in reciting *Siegfried's Schwert* has been established here this afternoon. Bertram Poddle, congratulations upon your progress."

Bertie stood up and went forward to accept the money with a trembling hand. He had actually won a prize for his ability in a study. It seemed impossible, but the money was real, all right. He'd never had any serious hope of winning first prize. That had been a desperate dream. Five dollars wouldn't buy the course he needed, but, while his mind was falling apart, it would buy a number of consoling confections at Frubbler's. There was some comfort in that.

Bertie was still thinking about the hop-toads in his head when Mr. Konka came over to congratulate him. "Bertram," the teacher said, "you surprised me. You were unorthodox in your recitation, but your results were better than I expected. I do not know how you were able to recite so quickly without stumbling over the words. I think I have misjudged your abilities in the past. I think you have a keen mind, and are capable of great concentration. I am very much pleased by your interest in your studies. I will expect fine work from you in the future."

"Thank you, sir," Bertie stammered. "I'll try my best. It isn't so hard when you get the swing of it."

"Yes, Bertram," Mr. Konka agreed with a half-smile. "But 'Old MacDonald Had a Farm' is not exactly the swing we advocate for *Siegfried's Schwert*."

Bertie went out of the room with a great gladness in his heart that was hardly touched by his worry about his mind. When it came right down to it, he had won a prize. Right there in his pocket. Five good dollars. And for German, of all things. There wasn't much doubt about passing German now. You couldn't

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very well flunk a student who had won five dollars in the subject. Maybe he could let up on his German and work on some other subject a while. A couple of others were giving him a little trouble, and if he didn't get to work he'd get failing marks, and he'd never be able to win his letter, no matter how good he was in track.

As Bertie fiddled with his locker, his math teacher came down the hall. She was a serious, middle-aged woman who could never understand why students found Geometry difficult. "Ah, Bertram," she said, stopping, "I've just seen Mr. Konka. Congratulations on winning the prize."

"Thank you," Bertie said, blushing a little from pleasure.

"I hope you apply yourself to Geometry as diligently," she said. "We have no money to award for prize students, but a good grade ought to be sufficient incentive."

"I'll try my best," Bertie promised.

"If you concentrate on Geometry as well as you have on German, you'll have no difficulty," she said. She stared at Bertie questioningly. "Have you ever tried . . . singing your theorems, Bertram?"

"No."

"It might work," she said hopefully. "I think the one about the isosceles triangle might go very well to the tune of 'The Old Oaken Bucket.'"

"I'll try it tonight," Bertie promised.

"Please do," she said. "I'll be watching your mathematical progress, Betram. I expect considerable improvement in your work."

Darn it, Bertie thought as he closed his locker, now he was in a spot. Just because he'd won one prize, they were all going to be watching him. He'd have to buckle down and study

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everything. He went out of the building gloomily wondering if it was worth five dollars.

As Bertie walked home, he turned the events of the afternoon over in his mind. Suddenly he stopped, a tight feeling around his heart. What was that Mr. Konka had said? "I think you have a keen mind and are capable of great concentration." And that without a single lesson from the Master Mind Institute of Mental Health. And the Geometry teacher — she had complimented him on his ability to concentrate. Could it mean that he had cured himself?

That night, as Bertie was doing his homework, planning to be prepared for the next day, when he was sure every teacher would call on him, he saw his detective magazine lying on the couch, and the picture of the tortured man, and the question, ARE YOU A MAN WITH A HOP-TOAD MIND?

Bertie put down his pencil and listened intently. He turned his attention inward, hardly breathing. From one corner of his head to the other, nothing stirred. There were no throbbings, kickings, or hoppings, as of toads. Bertie smiled, reached in his pocket to touch the five-dollar bill, and turned his attention to a mathematical problem having to do with isosceles triangles.

CHAPTER TEN

BERTIE PODDLE was happy. He sat in the locker room putting on a track suit, and as he prepared for action he had no time to think of his past failures and defeats. The past was past, and ahead of him lay a glorious uncertainty, a trial of speed and endurance, in which he might surprise everyone, including himself, and win a place on the team.

Bertie pulled on his jersey and track shorts, and heavy socks. He put on sweat pants and a sweat shirt, feeling warm and snug, and vigorously bulky. He sat down to put on the track shoes, and he breathed in the familiar odor of linament, adhesive tape, chlorine and all the other manly smells that were a part of sport.

Bertie tied his shoes and stood up. He took two steps and sat down again. "Ow," he said softly, but with feeling. "Damn it, they've given me a bad pair of shoes." He untied the shoes and took them off, examining the insides. The way it felt, the spikes were all inside the shoes, instead of on the outside.

Bertie was surprised to find there were no spikes sticking up inside the thin, light running shoes. He put them on again, but they still hurt his feet, and his face was twisted in an expression of pain and discomfort as he walked gingerly through the locker room and went outside.

It was easier walking on the soft ground, and the shoes didn't punish his feet so badly. Bertie quickened his pace from a walk to a jog, and enjoying the sensation of greater speed,

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he broke into a run. His feet felt as light as wings, and it seemed his body weighed no more than a plump feather. Except for an occasional jabbing at the soles of his feet from the spikes in the flimsy shoes, he felt fine, and ready for action.

At first, no one paid any attention to Bertie, so he wandered around by himself, wondering what he would try out for, and looking over the activities with a critical eye. He examined a few hurdles, judged their height, touched them, measured them, and decided against the hurdles.

He strolled past a twelve-pound shot lying on the ground. Marcia had mentioned the shot-put. No better time in the world to give it a try, and see how far he could toss it. Bertie reached down with one hand to pick up the shot. His fingers slipped from the round iron ball. He tried again, getting his hand under it, but he almost broke his wrist. Making sure that no one was watching, he stealthily picked it up with both hands.

It was much heavier than Bertie had expected, but he finally managed to balance it in his hand, with the back of his hand supported by his shoulder. He stuck his left hand out, lifted his left leg, and heaved the shot with all his might. It described a mighty arc of six or eight inches, and Bertie had to leap out of the way to prevent its falling on his toes. Well, that took care of the shot put. The discus ought to be lighter — he'd try that.

Bertie hunted around until he found a discus lying in the grass. He picked up the platter, trying to figure how to hold it. He had imagined this would weigh about as much as a dinner plate, but it was of heavy wood, and with a metal rim. It was awkward to hold, too, and kept falling from his hand. Bertie finally got it behind his back, in the approved fashion,

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gripping the edge with his fingers as the discus lay along his forearm. He whirled around once, twice, three times, and came out spinning and throwing. Somehow his fingers held on too long, and the discus, instead of sailing through the air, wobbled a little as it went straight up for several feet, and Bertie had to protect himself with his forearms as it fell back on him.

"Nuts," Bertie said disgustedly. He looked around, but all he saw was a pole, for vaulting, and he didn't even pick it up, let alone try to do that impossible thing. That was a sport for boys who were built like grasshoppers, and not for the round and solid, like himself. There was no doubt about it. He was a natural born runner.

Bertie's aimless wandering finally took him past the track coach, Mr. Martin, who knew Bertie from the year before. "Trying out for track, Poddle?" he called.

"Yes sir," Bertie answered, going over to the coach.

"What do you run?"

Bertie considered the question carefully. "I'm not particular," he said at length. "As long as it's not too far."

"How about the mile?" Coach Martin asked.

Bertie's face went white. He didn't even like to walk that far.

"The half-mile?"

Bertie lifted his foot and solemnly examined the spikes on his right foot.

"Maybe you're right," Coach Martin said, reading Bertie's mind. "Heavy boys like you usually aren't good distance runners, but you do make good sprint men. How does the twenty sound to you?"

"What ever happened to the old fifty-yard dash, Coach?" Bertie asked hopefully. "That's a good distance."

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"I've got plenty of fast fifty-yard men," the coach answered. "Why don't you try the two-twenty?"

"If the school needs me there," Bertie said gallantly, "I cannot decline. I will run the two-twenty."

"Fine," the coach said. "Join those fellows over at the track, and be ready to run in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Coach," Bertie said. He dashed away at top speed, to impress Martin.

"Poddle!"

Bertie came to a stiff-legged halt and turned around. "Yes?"

"Have you warmed up yet?"

"Not yet. I was just about to . . ."

"Take it easy until you do. You'll pull a muscle if you run too hard when you're cold."

Somewhat subdued, Bertie joined the two-twenty men. They were bending and stretching and going through the various calisthenics that Bertie had always despised. But he joined in, flinging his arms about and bending and jumping up and down. After four minutes of this activity Bertie was winded, and ready to fall down and rest. He struggled through a final twist and bend, and was looking for a soft place to lie down when Coach Martin came over and said crisply, "All right, boys, let's have the two-twenty now."

Bertie was aghast. "Now?" he gasped.

"On your marks," the coach ordered. Bertie swayed toward the starting line with the others. All the other runners knelt.

"Set."

The runners raised up, tensed for a quick start.

"Relax," Martin called. "What's the matter, Poddle? Can't you bend down?"

"Sure," Bertie said. "But if I do I can't stand up again."

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"All right, then. You can start from a standing position. But you'll get off to a slow start."

Again the runners toed their mark. Bertie bent his knees in a slight crouch, planning his race. He would start off easily, and run just behind the leader. Then, as they reached the hundred yard mark, he would step up the pace, and in the final fifty yards he would really open up, pass the leading runner, and breeze in the winner.

Bertie was off easily at the sound of the gun, just as he had planned, covering the ground with a smooth, distance-consuming stride, and hardly exerting himself. Then he stared ahead, his mouth hanging open, as he saw all the other runners far ahead of him, churning up the track as though they only had fifty yards to run. Bertie turned on all his speed, but by the time he reached the hundred yard line, the race was over. Grimly determined not to quit, Bertie steamed along, and at last he staggered across the finish line at the two-twenty mark. He veered off and stumbled over to the boys who had timed the race. "What was my time?" Bertie gasped painfully.

"Time for what?"

"The two-twenty," Bertie panted, holding his side.

"Were you in that?"

Bertie didn't try to explain. He was too tired. His head throbbed, and his stomach was playing see-saw. He dragged himself to a water bucket and gulped a long cool drink, easing his dry throat. His head still pained. When Bertie straightened up, he saw Coach Martin looking at him. "Shouldn't do that, Poddle," the coach said gravely. "It will make you sick."

"My throat was dry," Bertie explained.

Coach Martin changed the subject. "Was that your best speed? The running you just did?"

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"I got off to a slow start," Bertie said. "I could do better."

"I mean after you started, and for all the distance. Is that the fastest you can run?"

"I could probably do better," Bertie repeated. "These shoes . . ."

"Well, I have a spot for you, I think. Report to me when you get your wind back."

"Yes sir!" Bertie puffed. He smiled at the retreating form of the coach. He'd have to thank Marcia for this. Why hadn't he thought of track before? Only one race, and Coach Martin could see he was a natural for track. That blue H was going to look mighty good on his chest. Mighty good.

When Bertie had fully recovered his breath, he jogged over to report to Martin.

"Bertie," the coach said. "How would you like to run a hundred yards?"

"Fine." Bertie's heart leaped with joy. Better than he had expected. And he liked the idea of winning his letter for running a hundred yards rather than two hundred and twenty. He would be able to win two races in less distance than the two-twenty men were able to win one.

"Line up with the boys at the track," the coach said. "And run your fastest."

"I will," Bertie promised grimly. As he trotted to take his position, he saw Marcia walking onto the field with Wilbur Frost. Bertie's lips tightened. Well, he'd show them both. The track was going to be scorched black where he ran. Marcia and Wilbur stopped near the finish line for the dash. They'd both be on hand to see his victory.

Bertie was so engrossed with his thoughts that he did not notice the other runners were also starting from a standing

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position. His eyes were fixed on the hundred-yard marker, and he knew that he would be the first one there.

Bertie was off with the crack of the gun. His heavy legs drove hard at the ground, his spikes stabbed at the cinder track, and his round body was carried forward with a speed and momentum he had never before achieved.

Bertie was about twenty yards down the track before he realized that no one had passed him, and no one was running in front of him. *He was leading!* He threw his head back to suck in more air, he clenched his fists so tightly his nails cut into his palms, and he tried to make his legs move faster and faster.

Bertie heard the pounding of other feet behind him, and he put forth every ounce of energy into his running. At fifty yards someone was pulling up even with him. At seventy-five yards a hot iron band was tightening cruelly around his chest, but he had pulled slightly ahead of his opponent. His feet weighed a ton. The more he tried to drive his legs, the slower they seemed to move. He ran on, trying to hurl his body forward, to out-run his legs, to leave the ground with the fury and desperation of his heavy charge at the finish line.

As the last ten yards were run, Bertie's eyes could no longer see. Waves of blackness came over him, spinning him away, and the stabbing in his chest was almost unendurable. Bertie threw his tortured head back as he crossed the finish line in a triumphant, agonized surge, conscious of the fact that he had crossed it first.

Blindly, Bertie veered off the track. He could not see, and he breathed in tortured sobs. He tried to slow down, and walk, but his rubbery legs would not hold him, and he collapsed in a heap. He didn't try to get up, but lay where he was, deathly sick, his head splitting, his heart pounding terribly. But despite every-



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thing, there was a triumphant singing in his brain. He had won!

Still gulping air, still sobbing it out, Bertie sat up and rubbed his head. He looked around for the other runners, but none were in sight. Puzzled, he looked at the track. A small group of runners, tightly bunched, were going around the track at a moderate pace. They looked familiar to Bertie. He frowned, and scratched his head. They were the fellows he had been running against!

Bertie pulled at some grass and chewed it absent-mindedly. They were still running. Why? Wasn't the race over? Bertie was bewildered, and worried.

He was sitting there chewing grass and trying to figure it all out when Marcia and Wilbur approached him. "What's the matter, Bertie?" Wilbur questioned, grinning. "Why didn't you finish the race?"

"I did finish," Bertie said defensively, not bothering to conceal his dislike for Wilbur. "Didn't I?" Bertie addressed the question to Marcia.

"Finished!" Wilbur cried. "That was the mile run, Bertie. You only ran a hundred yards. Finished! Listen to him."

"A mile?" Bertie echoed dully. "Mile?" He looked at Marcia, waiting for her to tell him the truth about his triumph.

"That's right, Bertie," she said. "It was for a mile."

"You'd better start running if you want to finish before the day is over," Wilbur advised. "Up and at 'em, Poddle."

Wilbur shook his head and laughed pityingly. Even Marcia had to smile at the lugubrious expression on Bertie's round face. His blue eyes looked so innocent and puzzled, he looked like a plump blonde baby who had just dropped his ice cream out of the carriage and couldn't understand why the cone was empty.

Bertie got to his feet, brushing away the grass that clung to

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his track suit. His legs were still weak, but his breathing was under control. He was about to say something to Marcia and Wilbur, but his heart was too heavy for any feeling but a crushed numbness. He turned and walked away without uttering a sound.

What a fool they had made of him! He had been tricked into thinking he was winning the hundred yard dash, and he was really running against the milers. Just a funny fat boy, that's all he was. Always good for a laugh. A fine way to treat anyone who wanted to give the school all he had. Let them laugh. At least he had the satisfaction of knowing he had tried his best. The coach, too. The coach shouldn't have done it. It wasn't fair. It wasn't his fault he wasn't slim and fast and capable. The school clown. Bertie bit his lip as he stumbled toward the locker room. It was hard going, because his eyes were blurred with hot tears, but he didn't want to raise his hand and wipe them away. The others would be watching, and laughing. He wouldn't let them know how it hurt.

Head down, dejected, thoroughly beaten, Bertie plodded past the coach without seeing him. "Something wrong, Poddle?" Coach Martin asked.

Bertie looked up. "The joke's over, isn't it?" he asked in a choking voice.

"Joke? What joke? Practice isn't over. I haven't dismissed the squad yet."

"But I was running against the mile. . . ."

"Look, Bertie," Coach Martin said. "I put you against the milers on purpose, after I saw you run the two-twenty. The way you ran the hundred proved I was right. Bertie, you can run the hundred just fast enough to pace our milers. Believe me when I say this: we need you for that. It's an inglorious, thank-

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less job, but it is important. Frankly, Bertie, it's the only place on the team where you can fit right now. I won't ask you to take it, because there's no chance of winning your letter at it. All it will do is help others win."

"I'll do it, Coach," Bertie said earnestly. "If it will help Heeble, I'll be glad to do it. Shucks, a letter isn't everything. I'll run a hundred. I'll run a thousand if you want me to."

"A hundred will be enough," Coach Martin said. "And Bertie . . ."

"Yes, Coach?"

"Technically, you won't be able to win a letter doing what you've volunteered for. But I like your spirit, and if you stick with it, I'll see if I can convince the Board that you've earned one, too. I can't promise anything, but I'll try."

And then, for a reason that he didn't understand — perhaps because at that moment he needed something to bolster his pride and self-respect, Bertie did something he never could have imagined himself doing. "If you don't mind, Coach," Bertie said, not sure that it was himself he heard talking, "I'd rather win mine the regular way or not at all."

"Poddle," Coach Martin said. "I'm proud to have you on the squad."

It was all Bertie could do to keep from clicking his heels together and giving the coach an old Roman "We-who-are-about-to-die-salute-you" salute.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IF HE WERE as fast with his feet as he was with his tongue, Bertie Poddle reflected moodily, he would be establishing new world records on the track every day.

The cause of Bertie's dour observation was his promise to Coach Martin that he would be glad to pace the milers for sweat rather than glory, and his proud request not to be given a letter unless he won it in competition.

Yes, Bertie told himself, it had sounded fine when he said it, but all it meant was that he had talked himself out of the first chance (and probably his only chance) to win a blue H. "Nice going, Poddle," Bertie said to himself with heavy sarcasm. "Nice going, you lunkhead."

Darn it, Bertie scowled as he jogged slowly around the cinder track to limber up, it was the same thing as football all over again. If he were any better, he'd be in competition; if he were any worse, he wouldn't be on the squad. But somehow he seemed to be just good enough to let somebody else practice on him. What a spot!

Bertie went around the quarter-mile track alternately walking and running, swinging his arms, flexing his legs, and working the kinks out of his body. He was sore in a dozen places, and every time he moved, he discovered a new aching muscle. Yet, now, a week after he had reported for the team, he knew that his wind was better, and his running smoother. The coach had taught him how to get off to a faster start, and when he veered off the track at the one hundred yard mark, he no longer

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was completely exhausted, and sick. He slowed to a trot, and then tapered off by running slowly in place, breathing heavily, but still on his feet.

Completing his warm-up, Bertie slipped off his heavy sweat shirt and sweat pants, and stood on the field in his running clothes. The air was still cold, and Bertie's pale legs roughened into a million goose bumps. He jumped up and down, swinging his arms across his chest, and looking down, tried to pull in his stomach so that it looked smaller than his chest.

The field was crowded with track men. They were running and exercising, leaping into broad-jumps, tossing thudding shots, and vaulting gracefully with long poles. A couple of hurdle men, running easily, came past Bertie as swift and graceful as birds, seeming to fly over the hurdles without an effort. It seemed to him that every other runner on the team floated rather than ran, and that he was the only one who became winded, and pounded heavily. He wished he hadn't promised to stay on the squad. Everyone else had a good chance for competition, and winning a letter, but the whole squad knew why he was out there. They kidded him about it, too, and he tried not to let them see that he minded. Next time he'd stop and think before he made any promises.

Bertie saw the mile runners gathered around Coach Martin, and he dutifully trotted over. Martin was dressed in slacks, sweat shirt, and a baseball cap. He was a young coach, but he knew his business. He drove his squad hard, and it showed up when they ran against other schools. Heeble had a good record, and Martin was determined to keep it good.

"You fellows are running the first quarter too fast," Martin was saying. "These races pay off at the finish, not at the start. You have to learn to time yourselves better. A good miler has

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to plan his race down to the second, and run each quarter according to a plan. You've got to smooth out, and run the first three quarters to the second. The last quarter is what you make it."

"Poddle's throwing us off," one of the milers said. He was a long-legged boy who went around the track in great, easy strides. He looked like an ostrich trying to catch a train, but he was their best runner.

"Poddle? How?"

Bertie looked from the complaining runner to the coach, and back to the runner again.

"He's taking that first hundred too fast," the boy said. "At first it was just right, but the last two days he's been throwing us off. He's got to slow down a little."

Coach Martin looked at Bertie. "How about that?"

Bertie's normally ruddy face reddened further with pleasure and embarrassment. "I don't know. I just run as fast as I can. I've only got one speed."

Coach Martin thought in silence, looking at Bertie. "Run the two-twenty, instead of the hundred," he said. "Maybe that extra distance will do it. All right, boys, let's go."

The boys lined up on the track, and Bertie wondered how he would last the longer distance. He decided to run a little slower than top speed, and see how that worked. He wanted to be sure he lasted the distance. He was nervous and worried as he tensed for the starting gun.

In his week Bertie had learned to time the starting signals, and this time he was away as the gun sounded, and the world blurred as he looked straight ahead and drove forward. He was going fast, almost at top speed, but there was a slight reserve of speed that he could still call on. He was staying

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well in front, and that seemed to be good. He tried to hold his speed constant, and his stride smooth. Behind him he could hear the rhythmic sound of feet and controlled breathing as the mile runners followed him.

Bertie flashed past the hundred yard marker still going strong. A great surge of pride filled his chest as he stepped into the second half of his run. He would make it, easily. He was running smoothly, and without effort. He floated along as in a dream.

His dream was shattered as a runner suddenly drew up alongside of him. It was the tall boy with the long legs. He was carrying a stop-watch in his hand, and as he drew abreast of Bertie he glanced at it quickly.

The shock of being overtaken caused Bertie to break his stride for a moment. He wobbled, and ran roughly until he got over his surprise. The tall boy turned his head and grinned at Bertie, and started to pull ahead of him. But Bertie set his teeth grimly, clenched his hands, and increased his speed. Only then did he realize how much he had slowed down. No wonder his running had seemed smooth!

As Bertie dug in, calling on all his strength and speed, he was suddenly tired. All at once his breathing was labored, his running difficult, and his legs heavy. But he forced his legs to move faster, and slowly he drew abreast of the tall boy, and slowly pulled ahead. As Bertie moved to the lead, the tall boy looked at his watch again, and again grinned.

Bertie's ears were roaring, his eyes hazy, and the hot knives were in his chest again, but he kept his lead. It seemed the race would never end, and when Bertie felt he could not go another step, he reached the two-twenty line, and stumbled off the track.

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The milers swept past, and Bertie stood by the edge of the track with his head down, his arms hanging limp, and his feet braced far apart. His legs were weak and trembling, but he tried to keep them moving a little, so he wouldn't tighten up. It seemed he would never be able to get enough air in his lungs to satisfy them, and overcome the drowning sensation that racked his body.

By the time Bertie was breathing normally again, the mile run was over, and the runners were checking their time for each quarter and the complete mile. The tall boy nodded to Bertie, speaking between gasps. "Good going." He slipped a sweat shirt over his head. "Just right . . . Perfect time for the quarter . . . Kept the same pace."

Coach Martin was pleased, too. "Keep this up, and we'll have you running a good mile yet," he said to Bertie. And seeing the horrified look on Bertie's face he added quickly, "But two-twenty will be enough for now." Bertie smiled, relieved.

But Bertie was not meant to limit his running to two hundred and twenty yards. After several days he was used to the distance, and the milers complained that he was taking it too fast. Since Bertie could only run one speed consistently, Coach Martin moved him up to running four hundred and forty yards, and there was nothing Bertie could do but agree, try, and tear his heart apart on the longer distance.

Bertie had run the four-forty for three days when Coach Martin talked to him again. "Bertie," the coach said, "I don't want to raise any false hopes, but if you can cut ten seconds off your time for the four-forty, I could enter you in competition."

"Only ten seconds?" Bertie asked eagerly.

Coach Martin smiled. "Cutting ten seconds off your time

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for the four-forty is like running the mile a minute faster. Ordinarily, I wouldn't think it could be done, but you've learned a great deal, and you were pretty slow to begin with. The way you're going, I think you can shave those ten seconds off your time. From now on, you're not pacing the milers any more. I want you to run the half-mile to build up stamina, and then I'm going to turn you loose with the four-forty boys. They say you have to have horse blood to run the four-forty. Want to try it?"

Bertie nickered and laughed. "Sure," he said recklessly. But he wasn't so sure when he lined up with the eight-eighty men, and realized he had to run around the track twice — fast.

"Stick with them as long as you can," Coach Martin said to Bertie. "You'll finish way behind, but remember, you're not trying to be a half-miler. I want you to finish the distance, no matter how far behind you get, or how tired you are."

Bertie nodded, and set himself for the race. He wasn't going to try anything fancy this time. He'd watched the half-milers run often enough to know how fast they traveled. He was going to run last, and try to hang on as long as he could.

They were off in a tight bunch at the sound of the gun. Bertie had no trouble at first, although he had to run at almost his fastest pace to keep his place a stride behind the last regular runner. In a few seconds Bertie took advantage of a psychological assist. He matched strides with the nearest man, and then forgot about running. His legs seemed to move automatically with the other runner's, and it was almost as though the other man was running for them both. The steady thud-thud-thud of several feet touching the ground at the same moment seemed to help carry Bertie along. As long as he could lose himself in

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the hypnotic rhythm of the cadence, it made running easier. He let himself go, and relaxed, and kept his spot.

By the time they reached the half-way mark, Bertie was finding it hard going. Little by little, even though he took step for step with the leaders, he fell back. Then the other runners, jockeying for position, and running their own races, broke up the regular thud-thud,thud. Each man was running his own race now, with his own stride, and the smoothness, the easy swinging, were gone. Deprived of his stride-matching trick, Bertie was suddenly on his own. The other runners drew ahead rapidly, and he came puffing and blowing down the track, far in the rear, his stride choppy and ineffectual. It looked ludicrous to see this fat boy, trying so hard and running so slow, straining after the fleet-footed half-milers in what was almost a burlesque of their efforts.

Bertie hung on. It seemed hours passed and he still had to run. But he had promised the coach he would finish, and finish he did. It was hardly a running finish. Just a lifting of one heavy, tired leg after the other, a putting forth of tremendous effort, a gasping, tortured progress down the track, and a hazy, slow-motion finish, like running in a nightmare, when the feet seem glued to the earth.

The agonies of other runnings were nothing compared to those Bertie felt when he staggered off the track at the finish. His heart pounded so hard it hurt his chest, Bertie clutched his left side, as though he had to hold his leaping heart from crashing out of his body. His breaths were gasping, whistling sobs that hurt his throat and teased his starved lungs. He trembled from head to foot, retching, and trying to hold himself as sharp pains stabbed at his abdomen. His head was

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splitting. His eyes were still blurred. He couldn't breathe, and yet he had to.

"No . . . more . . ." Bertie moaned to himself as he dragged himself to a quiet spot. "No . . . no . . . more . . ." His eyes blinded with tears of exhaustion and weakness. It was too much. He couldn't take it. Not for all the letters in the world. He drew in rasping, shuddering breaths. He couldn't . . . he couldn't . . . he couldn't . . . He'd given everything he had . . . more than he had . . . it was killing him . . . he couldn't . . . couldn't . . .

When he could move again, Bertie went to the spot where he had thrown his sweat clothes and put them on, guarding against a chill. Then he went to the water bucket, and rinsed his mouth. His breathing was normal, but he was weak, and still shaking. Something had gone out of him in that run. Bertie sloshed the water around in his mouth, almost succumbing to the temptation of drinking it. Then he spurted it out on the ground, and walked around, trying to regain complete control of himself.

It was with a feeling of dread that Bertie saw Coach Martin coming toward him. He wanted to run away, and never see a cinder track again.

"That was a fine try, Bertie," the coach said. "You did better than I expected. If you could keep that good start for another four hundred yards, you'd be an eight-eighty man."

Bertie looked at the coach without enthusiasm, but said nothing.

"As soon as you get your wind back," the coach said carelessly, "you can go around again. Try to finish a little stronger next time. You can do it."

Again! Bertie shook his head. A feeling of bitterness rose up

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in him. It was easy for the coach to talk about finishing strongly. He didn't have to run. All he had to do was watch. He'd feel different about it if he was on the track. Again! Bertie knew he couldn't walk around the track again, let alone run. No, it wasn't worth it. You could kill yourself trying, and all you got out of it was an order to try harder. Harder!

Coach Martin walked away before Bertie could answer, and tell him how he felt. The coach took it for granted his runners did what he told them to, and that was that. Bertie glared at Martin's back, but he did not leave the field. He knew he was through, and that he'd had all of track he wanted, but it wasn't easy to walk in and hand in your uniform and say you'd quit.

"Hey, Bertie!"

Bertie looked around and saw Wiggins Hackenlooper beckoning to him. Wiggins had been putting the shot, and hadn't exerted himself to any great extent. He looked disgustingly fresh and strong.

Bertie walked slowly toward Wiggins. "What's up?"

Wiggins held up a copy of *Newsweek*, the school paper. "I got an advance copy of the paper. Seen it yet?"

"No. What's in it?"

"Plenty. That guy Frost!"

"What does he have to say?" Bertie reached for the paper.

"Plenty," Wiggins repeated gruffly. "Read this."

Bertie looked at the paper, which was opened to Wilbur's column. As he read, an angry red flush spread over his face. The story was headed, "The (Poddle) Plod Thickens." And then the story:

"If you want laughs, this writer urges you to watch the track team practicing. The squad boasts of a lead-footed Mercury who is setting world records every day for the slowest

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running ever seen on a quarter-mile track. In case you are wondering who this human snail is, I am referring to none other than our fellow student Bertie (Jet-Propelled-Jello) Poddle.

"Bertie is an old hand at setting unique records in sport. He is the only student in school who has tried out for every activity and failed to make the grade in one. We compliment his spirit, but we can't say much for his judgment.

"The other day I was walking along the track when I passed Bertie. 'Bertie,' I said, 'what race are you going to be in today?' 'Out of my way!' he shouted as I walked by. 'Can't you see I'm running in the hundred yard dash!' I made inquiries, and found out the race had started the day before, and Bertie still had forty yards to go.

"I know some of you will doubt my story, but all you have to do is watch the track squad in action, and you'll see Poddle. He's inaction."

Bertie looked up. Wiggings couldn't repress a grin, although he didn't think the article fair.

"Poddle charges down the track," the article continued, "like a bull elephant after a peanut butter sandwich. His progress often throws competing runners into confusion, for Bertie is built like some of the new cars, and it's hard to tell whether he's coming or going. But Bertie is as popular with the track team as he was with all the others he tried out for. There's nothing like a little comic relief to keep up the morale. . . ."

Bertie handed the paper back to Wiggings. "I'll talk to Wilbur about that," Bertie said grimly. "A guy comes down here and works hard to help the team. . . ."

"You do look funny on the track," Wiggings said. "But so do those long string beans with their knobby knees, and broom-

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handle arms and legs. Nobody looks good when they're running."

"It's not my fault I haven't made a team yet," Bertie cried. "I try hard. Anyway, Coach Martin said I might be able to run the four-forty for the school. I guess that will be news to Wilbur. He'll look pretty silly when I've won my place on the squad, that's all I've got to say. And besides . . ."

"The Coach is calling you," Wiggins said.

Bertie felt slightly queasy. "Wants me to run the half-mile again," he muttered. "See you later, Wiggins."

"Feel like running again?" Martin asked as Bertie approached.

"I feel all right," Bertie said. He was still angry about the article, and his face showed it.

"You look a little tired," Martin said. "Tell you what — take three or four easy laps around the track and call it quits for today. We'll let you turn loose again tomorrow."

"Right, Coach," Bertie said. He turned and started jogging around the track. He was thinking of Wilbur all the time. Wait until the next time he saw that guy. He'd make him eat his words. He'd show Wilbur who the clown was. Lead-footed Mercury, eh? Well, he would make Wilbur think his knuckles were lead, too. Bertie was so taken up with his plans of revenge, he went around the track five times before he discovered it was time to head for the showers.



When he was dressed in street clothes again, his pale blonde hair wet and combed, and his face round and shiny as an apple, Bertie decided to drop in at Frubbler's before going home. He

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was still burned over Wilbur's column, and he wanted to blow off a little steam. He was always sure of finding a couple of his friends at the drug store, and he'd have the opportunity to sound off about Wilbur — and also mention his progress in track.

Frubbler's was not crowded when Bertie arrived, but his friends were on hand. Marcia and Hyacinth were sitting by the juke box, dreamily listening to their current crooning hero. Ted and Wiggins were reading comic books and magazines which they picked off the racks and returned again without buying. Mr. Frubbler viewed their activity with a sad eye, but said nothing. When Bertie came in, Mr. Frubbler curved his stern facial muscles into a big smile, and waited for the inevitable order.

Bertie held up a restraining hand as Mr. Frubbler reached for the usual glasses and dishes. "Nothing today, thanks," Bertie said in a louder voice than necessary. "I have to watch myself. Training, you know. The coach said I'd be running the four-forty in competition soon, so I can't break any rules."

"What's that?" Ted asked without looking up from his magazine.

"The four-forty," Bertie said proudly. "Coach Martin said I was improving so fast he thought I'd be able to compete."

"That's swell." Ted put the magazine back in the rack, tearing the cover slightly. Mr. Fubbler sighed and resigned himself to a net loss for the week's business. When Poddle didn't buy anything, business was really bad.

Wiggins gave Bertie a beefy, friendly pat on the back. "I hope you make it, Bertie."

"I will," Bertie declared. "I'll show Wilbur he made a little mistake. He spoke up just a little too quickly."

Bertie Comes Through

Hyacinth broke away from the spell of the juke box and joined the boys. "Bertie," she said, pushing a mass of red hair back from her face. "Just say the word and I'll clean up on that scribbler. He can't say those snide things about my friends and get away with it."

"I'll handle it myself, Hyacinth," Bertie said stiffly. "The first time I see Wilbur."

"You'd better watch out for . . ." Ted began to warn Bertie, but Bertie interrupted him.

"I'll take care of it, Ted. I don't mind being kidded, but I know what Wilbur's driving at." Bertie flashed a quick look at Marcia, who was spending another nickel to hear Sinatra again.

"Wilbur's no push-over," Ted cautioned.

"Neither am I." Bertie was filled with anger, and the prospect of being a regular track man seemed to add manliness to his entire being.

"But he can box . . ."

"So can I. Eh, Wiggins?" Bertie turned to Wiggins for confirmation.

"Oh, yes," Wiggins said, not wanting to hurt Bertie's feelings by being too truthful. "You've got a good right hand, Bertie. A swell right hand. Only you should try to remember not to lead with it."

Hyacinth left for home, and Wiggins went out with her. Ted wanted to leave, but he waited patiently for Marcia to hear her song through. Ted reached for another magazine, and Mr. Frubbler wished he'd gone into some nice steady business like undertaking.

Bertie looked at the clock and saw he was late. He picked up his books and left for home, planning how he would tell about his chances in track.

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A dozen steps from Frubbler's door, Bertie saw a familiar figure approaching. Wilbur was coming along with a nonchalant stride, his hands in his pockets, his head thrust forward, a lock of black hair falling carelessly over his forehead. Bertie stopped and waited, his heart pounding.

"Hello, Bertie," Wilbur said easily as he came up. "How's the human rocket?"

"I want to talk to you, Wilbur," Bertie said, trying to make his voice sound threatening.

"All right." Wilbur kept his hands in his coat pocket, and his black eyes were mocking.

"I didn't like that column," Bertie said, and waited.

"That's too bad."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

They stood eyeing each other, knowing that a clash was in the air.

"I warned you," Bertie said. "I told you what would happen if you didn't lay off me."

"You didn't scare me, Bertie."

"No? Then why didn't you print that stuff about me and the Gold Letter last fall? You said you were going to, but you didn't, did you? And you know why. I told you what I'd do..."

"You!" Wilbur barked scornfully, stung that Bertie thought he was afraid of him. "It wasn't because of you I didn't write it."

"No?"

"No."

"You talk big, Wilbur."

"So do you, Poddle. Now let me tell you something. The reason I didn't write about you was that Marcia asked me not to."

Bertie Comes Through

Bertie stared. He stepped backward, as though he had been struck. "Marcia?"

Wilbur saw that he had hit home, and followed up his advantage. "Yes, Marcia. She asked not to write about you, and I promised I wouldn't. She said she'd go to the Spring Dance with me if I didn't write the article."

"I don't believe it," Bertie cried hoarsely. "You're making it up."

"Go on," Wilbur scoffed. "You knew about it all the time."

"I don't hide behind women," Bertie cried angrily, his voice rising. He was overcome by anger and shame. So that was the reason Wilbur had kept quiet. Because a girl had taken Bertie's part. "I'll show you if I need Marcia's help!" Bertie howled. "Take off your coat. Right now. We'll settle it right now."

"Be yourself, Bertie," Wilbur said with maddening calmness.

"I am myself," Bertie replied in a shaking voice. "Take off your coat." Bertie threw down his books and stripped off his jacket.

"Now look," Wilbur said placatingly. "Fighting won't settle anything. . . ."

"It will settle one thing," Bertie shouted. "You'll know I can back up what I said. Marcia, huh? I'll show you . . ."

"Now look, Bertie." Wilbur's voice was impatient. "Don't be a fool. I can whip you without trying. I don't want to fight with you, because there's nothing to fight over. I don't dislike you, Bertie. You're too sensitive."

Bertie raised his fists. "Put 'em up, or I'll let you have it," he threatened, shuffling toward Wilbur. Bertie's face was red as a beet, his whole body trembled with anger. "Come on, if you think you can whip me. Come on."

"But Bertie . . ."

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"You're yellow! You're yellow!"

"I won't take that, Bertie. Take it back."

"You're yellow."

Wilbur slowly began unbuttoning his coat. "All right, Bertie, if you insist. Let's agree on one thing, though."

Bertie sneered, waving his right fist. "What?"

"Let's limit the fight to one knock-down. When one of us goes down, that's the end of the fight, all right?"

"What's the matter?" Bertie taunted, feeling sudden confidence at Wilbur's show of weakness. "Scared I'll muss you up?"

"One knockdown ends the fight, or it's off," Wilbur said.

"All right," Bertie growled, "I'll be satisfied with knocking you down once. I've waited for this a long time."

Wilbur took off his coat and folded it, and laid it down carefully. Then he squared off with Bertie and waited.

Bertie moved in grimly behind his fists. Even in the heat of his anger, he was aware that Wilbur was taking a very good position. Bertie had boxed enough to know when a man was at home with his fists, and Wilbur certainly seemed to know what he was doing. Wilbur stood with his left out, his right hand held back. He had a rather open stance, but as Bertie advanced Wilbur kept shifting his feet so that he always faced Bertie in a good position to counter-attack, and Bertie, trying to work in close, found himself running into Wilbur's left every time he moved in.

As the fight began, Bertie's anger gave way to a kind of coolness. Everything was suddenly sharp and clear. He was aware of the scuffling sound of their shoes on the sidewalk, of the white streaks on Wilbur's knuckles, and of the passers-by who had stopped to watch.

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Suddenly Bertie saw an opening. For a moment, Wilbur had let his left drop. Bertie threw out his own left, and pulling his right hand all the way back, he closed his eyes and brought it around in a mighty hay-maker that would have carried Wilbur's head off his shoulders had it ever connected.

In the blur that followed, Bertie felt his left missing, and then, already off-balance, his right came swinging up from the sidewalk in a tremendous arc. Wilbur moved a little to one side, allowed the swinging right hand to miss his face by inches, and stepping forward, he tapped Bertie lightly on the side of the jaw. As Bertie was already over-balanced, the tap was enough to turn him around, cause his legs to tangle, and send him crashing to the pavement in a sitting position.

Bertie was so overcome by shock and surprise that he sat where he had fallen, his mouth hanging open. Wilbur was already putting on his coat. "One knockdown, Bertie," he said, and walked away.

Bertie put down a hand to help himself up. As he turned, getting to his feet, he saw Bart watching him. Their eyes met, and Bart, his face a picture of grief and humiliation, turned and ran toward home. That Bertie had been knocked down, he could understand. But that Bertie had not risen to fight again. . . . Bart raced home crying in rage and shame, his faith in Bertie completely destroyed.

Bertie had understood the look on Bart's face. He saw himself as he must have appeared to Bart — a blubbery big brother who quit the moment he was off his feet. Bertie slowly picked up his books, wondering if he should ever go home again.

Well, Bart had to find out sooner or later. There was no denying it. He was a four-flusher. A big blowhard. A clown. He was everything Wilbur had said.

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"Bertie!"

Bertie didn't even turn around as he heard the familiar voice. He didn't want to see Marcia, or talk to her. What must she think of him, to feel it was necessary for her to keep Wilbur from writing about him. A fat, stupid kid, that's all he'd ever meant to her.

"Bertie. . . ." She had caught up with him, and was walking by his side. Bertie stubbornly refused to look at her.

"Bertie . . . Wilbur just told us what happened. I'm sorry, Bertie. I didn't know it would turn out like this."

"I — I think you might have let me fight my own battles," Bertie said, trying to raise enough pride inside him to lift his head.

"I should have known. Anyway, Bertie, I told Wilbur our date for the Spring Dance was off. Will you take me, Bertie?"

"Me?" Bertie turned to look at her. "You're *asking me?*"

"Yes," Marcia said. "I am. I wanted to go with you all along. I never should have made that silly promise to Wilbur. Will you take me?"

"Oh, of course!" Bertie answered fervently. "Gosh, Marcia, you know I . . . I wanted to take you. . . . I . . ."

"Then it's settled," Marcia said, smiling "And don't feel bad about Wilbur's . . . victory. You know, Ted was telling me the reason Wilbur didn't try out for the boxing team is that he boxed for money last summer, and he's considered a professional. So there's no disgrace in losing to him, is there?"

"Not if you say so, Marcia," Bertie said tenderly. "But it was his idea to limit the fight to one knockdown. If we'd gone on, I . . ."

"Oh, let's not talk about it," Marcia said. "It's over."

When she left, Bertie's heart was high as the new moon. In

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spite of everything, he was taking Marcia to the Spring Dance. Wilbur might have won the fight, but in so doing he'd lost out with Marcia. Bertie laughed aloud, and then the laugh stuck in his throat. "Oh!" Bertie cried suddenly. "Oh! I've already asked Hyacinth to go. Ooooooh," Bertie groaned. "Now I am in a spot. Darn it. What am I going to do now? I don't dare break my date with Hyacinth, and how can I tell Marcia . . . Ooooooh, darn it!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

"BERTIE," Mrs. Poddle said to her fidgeting son, "you haven't touched your breakfast."

Bertie was craning his neck to look out of the window, at the sky. "It's going to be a clear day, Ma," he said. "I'd better go. We're having a final warm-up this morning before the track meet this afternoon."

"But your breakfast . . ."

"I'll run better on an empty stomach." Bertie looked serious. "There has to be an elimination race today. Only two of us can run in the four-forty, and we've got five men trying. We're going to have the run-off this morning, and the two fastest men get to run against Parlow Prep this afternoon."

Mr. Poddle put aside his paper. "What are your chances, Bertram?"

"Very good, Dad," Bertie answered. "I don't expect to win, but I have a chance to come in second. I'll give it everything."

Bertie excused himself and stood up. Bart was still at the table, paying unusually close attention to his cereal. "Uh . . . want to come along, Bart?" Bertie asked.

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Bart didn't look up. "No, thanks, I have something else to do."

Bertie flushed, knowing why Bart didn't want to go with him. "Okay, suit yourself."

"What?" Mr. Poddle demanded. "Bart not howling to go along? Bertie asking him to? What's the matter around here?"

"It's all right, Dad," Bertie said hastily. "He doesn't have to."

Bertie left the house feeling downcast. Ever since his fight with Wilbur, Bart had stopped demanding to go with him on Saturdays. Bart was ashamed to be seen with him, and that hurt. As much as he detested having Bart along most of the time, it was hard to have those bright, accusing eyes staring at him in the house, and to feel that he had fallen so low that Bart was ashamed to be with him. Well, it would be different when he was a track star . . . maybe.

At the school, Bertie changed into his track clothes. This was the day he had looked for in every sport, and which had come true in track. At last, an opportunity for competition, and a letter. He had waited so long, and tried so hard, it was anti-climatic, and unreal.

The four-forty men gathered around the coach before their run. "There isn't much difference among you," Coach Martin said. "Any two of you might win out this morning. You all have the same chance. Now let me see some running."

The runners grinned self-consciously at one another, stomped their feet and tried to hide their nervousness. They lined up and prepared for the race, each man determined he would end up front, and Bertie determined to be the second man across if he couldn't be first.

They crouched, tensed, and were off with the gun. Again, as it had in the past, Bertie's sense of timing helped him by a fraction of a second, and he was off simultaneously with the shot.

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It gave him a two step lead as they charged down the track, and running grimly, Bertie held his place.

He knew this distance now, and he knew how the others ran. He found his most efficient pace and held it, keeping to the front as they went into the first turn. It didn't seem natural, somehow, to see this heavy boy running with the lean tracksters. He had so much more weight to carry, and needed to put forth so much more effort, that he seemed out of place with them. Yet, sweeping around the turn in a whirl of flashing legs and pumping arms, Bertie held his lead, and even tried to increase it.

The pressure came on the second, and last turn. The other runners, who had let Bertie set the early pace, and waited for him to tire, now started to crowd him, closing in as they pounded into the turn, ready to give all as they came out to the stretch. But Bertie knew their plans, and he had his own. He hugged the inside rail, fighting off desperately every attempt to overtake him.

As the five men came around the turn in a tight, furious charge, Bertie shot the works. Narrowing his eyes until he could hardly see, forgetting everything but the finish line, he drove his big legs into the most furious action they were capable of. A boy was drawing up alongside him, and Bertie had to fight back. He drove harder, blindly, when disaster struck. His right foot, coming down with terrific drive and power, struck a stone that had not been culled from the track. His spikes hit it at an angle, twisting his foot inward. Bertie's momentum carried him past all recovery. He felt a sudden sharp, unbearable pain stab his foot, and then he was falling. He felt his knees hit the rough cinders, and then his body, sliding, being scratched and torn, and his mouth fill with dirt. He made a futile effort to rise, but

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the moment he put his weight on his right foot, he was down again, writhing, his eyes filled with tears of pain and disappointment.

They carried him back to the locker room, and all Bertie could think about was his lost chance. He had been leading . . . leading! It wasn't fair . . . after all . . . everything . . . the last minute . . . his sweaty, dirty face was contorted with grief as they put him down and the doctor cut away his stocking to look at his foot.

"What tough luck," Wiggins said feelingly as he stood by. "I was watching you, Bertie. You were doing great."

Bertie groaned as the doctor pressed his foot. He lifted his head, watching. "Is . . . is it bad?" Bertie whispered.

"Bad enough to keep you off the track until next year," the doctor said in his even, professional voice. "It feels as though you've broken one of the metatarsal bones in your foot. We'll have to X-ray to find out."

Bertie sank back on the table, staring at the ceiling. "My luck," he said bitterly, his voice breaking. "My luck."

An X-ray did show a fracture, and that took care of Bertie's track ambitions. They were able to fix his leg in metal supports, so he could get around with a cane, and he was on hand that afternoon to watch the meet against Parlow from the stands. The four-forty was won by Heeble, by a boy Bertie had once outrun. He knew in his heart he could have won that race if he had been in it. There had been his blue letter. There it went, to another boy. Bertie had no heart to watch the rest of the meet. He picked up his cane and hobbled awkwardly away. Many of his friends called words of sympathy to him, and he tried to grin away his depression, but he felt very low and dispirited as he made his slow, difficult way home.

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There was one beneficial result from his accident, however. Bertie was relieved from explaining his way out of a difficult social problem. He wouldn't be able to take anyone to the Spring Dance now.

He went out in the evening to explain this. First he went to see Hyacinth. When he got there, she was sitting on the porch with Wiggins. Bertie gestured with his cane. "Guess I can't take you to the Spring Dance, Hyacinth," he said. "Conditions beyond my control . . ."

"That's all right, Bertie," Hyacinth said. "I'm going with Wiggins."

"Are you?" Wiggins asked in pleased amazement.

"Of course." Hyacinth smiled at Bertie. "You know, Wiggins and I are becoming great friends, aren't we, Wiggins?"

"If you say so, Hyacinth," Wiggins said, blushing.

"He can beat me in Indian wrestling," Hyacinth said, sighing. "I never thought I'd find anyone . . ."

Bertie left after a few minutes. He was glad that Hyacinth was after Wiggins now, but he also regretted it a little. She was a pretty good sport, and he'd kind of miss having her boss him around.

Bertie continued to the Dale house. There, Ted talked in a way that made Bertie feel proud of his honorable wound, and Marcia made him sit in the best chair, and helped rest his foot on a hassock, and treated him so gently that Bertie felt as if he were a senior instead of a sophomore.

It was only when he was ready to leave that Bertie brought up the subject of not being able to take Marcia to the Spring Dance.

"Of course we can go," Marcia insisted. "We don't have to dance. It will be fun."

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"No," Bertie said. "Maybe you'd better go with someone else."

Marcia thought a moment. "Perhaps you're right, Bertie. I'll call Wilbur and tell him our date is on again."

"Wilbur. . . ?" Bertie had just resolved to take Marcia after she had coaxed him a little more. Now he'd put his foot in it — cast and all!

"He's really all right," Marcia said. "I don't see why you two can't be friends, in spite of the silly things he wrote, and the fight you had with him. I know he likes you."

"Like poison," Bertie said bitterly. "Well, I guess I'll go home, and give the leg a rest."

"I wish you and Wilbur would make up," Marcia said as she went to the door with Bertie. "Have you heard? He's been appointed student member of the Gold Letter Committee. Coaches Thornton and Martin, and a couple of teachers are on it, too."

"That's nice," Bertie said shortly. "Good night."

Bertie limped home in a black mood. Marcia was going with Wilbur, Wilbur was on the Gold Letter Committee, Bart was ashamed to be seen with him, his chances for a letter were shot, Marcia was going with Wilbur. . . . "Darn it!" Bertie said fiercely. "Darn it!" He pounded the sidewalk with his cane. Everything was dull and stupid and worthless. It was a dull, stupid world. Bertie stumped home with his lower lip stuck out. Darn it, it wasn't even any fun getting a broken foot in track.

* * * * *

When the baseball season opened, Bertie was busy catching flies. He sat at a table, where a ray of sunlight warmed one spot.

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Whenever a fly paused there to sun himself, and stretch his legs, Bertie would cautiously lift his hand, and then make a sudden swooping grasp at the fly. He caught many in this fashion.

Bertie's foot was in fair shape now. He didn't need his cane any more, but he still limped, and the doctor had warned him about trying to do anything strenuous. No running, jumping, or even fast walking. No twisting, or sudden strains. That took care of baseball. That took care of everything.

But it was more than Bertie could stand to go home every afternoon when school was over, while the other boys went to practice. He stayed away three days, and on the fourth, he went to the field, to watch.

Limping forward with the confidence of one who knew all the coaches and players, and who boasted an injury honestly acquired in the cause of school athletics, Bertie went to the dugout, where he was received cordially, and room was made on the bench. He sat down grunting, stretched his game leg, and turned a critical eye on the diamond, where thirty or forty hopefuls were working out.

Sitting on the bench, surrounded by sweating players, bats, gloves, sweat shirts, and all the gear that goes with baseball, Bertie suffered burning tortures because he could not join in. He longed for a jaunty baseball cap on his head and the gray and blue uniform on his body, and the cleated shoes on his feet. He slipped a glove on his left hand as he sat on the bench and pounded it with a ball. How good it felt to curve his fingers around a baseball again. It had been so long, he had forgotten.

Bertie watched hungrily as a batter leaned into his swing, and sent the white ball curving in a high, graceful arc against the blue sky. He writhed with envy as a fleet-footed fielder raced across the green grass to pull down the ball, flip it to his un-

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gloved hand, and make the long throw of return. He watched another batter hammering hot, bouncing grounders to infield candidates, saw the quick stab and scoop, and the ball being rifled around the bases and ending in glove after glove with shot-like explosions.

Off to one side, the pitchers were warming up. Ted Dale, lanky and smooth, was bringing his arm down in well-oiled motions, leaning into the follow-through, and watching as the ball smoked into the catcher's mitt, smiling or frowning according to his success with the pitch.

Baseball! The eight letters spelled spring and blue skies, and the smell of good green earth. Baseball! Who can think of books and droning lessons, and stuffy classrooms where yawns taste of chalkdust. Baseball! The moving arm, and swinging bat, the runners off like a shot, the fielder squinting into the sun, the slide in a cloud of dust, the race between ball and man, the hoarse cry of the umpire, the cries of joy, the groans, the arguments.

Baseball . . . A far cry from the cold and wet and mud of the grunting and pushing of football. A relief after the indoor, steam-heated confinement of basketball. Something more than the man against man of straight running in track. Baseball . . . baseball . . . aaaaaahhh . . . Bertie pounded the ball into his gloved hand with relentless rhythm. Baseball was here, and he was on the bench.

Ted Dale and Wiggins Hackenlooper, their faces flushed and hot, came to the bench to look for water. Wiggins had a big catcher's mitt in his hand.

"Nice going, Ted," Bertie said. "You're really getting the old pill to break."

"You're not kidding." Wiggins looked at the fingers of his left hand. "I could hardly hang on to a couple of them. Caught

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one right on the end of my middle finger." He put his hand to his mouth and chewed at the sore finger.

"How's your foot coming?" Ted asked, sitting down next to Bertie.

"Fine. But I won't be able to get around too good until summer."

"Ready to go, Wiggins?" Ted stood up, tossing a ball in the air.

"In a couple of minutes. I want the trainer to look at this finger. It's pretty sore."

"I'll wait." Ted sat down next to Bertie again. He pulled up a blade of grass and nibbled at it.

"Say, Ted . . ."

"Yeah?"

"I could catch a few for you until Wiggins comes back. Just so you won't get cold."

"How about your foot?"

"I'll take it easy. Want to try?"

"Sure," Ted answered. "Take Wiggins' glove. I'll go slow until you see how it is."

Bertie slipped the big mitt on his hand. It was sweaty inside, but it fit him well. He limped after Ted and then settled down at the spot where Wiggins had been catching. He squatted carefully, testing his foot. There wasn't too much strain on it. "Okay," Bertie called "I'm set."

Ted wound up deliberately and whipped over a fast straight ball. It slammed into Bertie's mitt with a sharp sound, and he dumped it into his ungloved hand and tossed it back. "Nice!" he yelled.

By standing and relaxing his leg after every few pitches, Bertie was able to keep catching without getting tired or hurt-

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ing his foot. It was wonderful to crouch there, watching Ted's arm, hand, and the ball, and to move his glove a fraction to gather in the pitch, and feel the shock as the ball was stopped.

They had been working about ten minutes when Coach Thornton, who also handled the baseball team, came over looking for Ted. He was surprised to see Bertie, in street clothes, doing the catching.

"Where's Wiggins?" Thornton asked a little sharply.

"Hurt his finger," Ted answered. "Bertie's filling in until he gets back."

"How's the foot, Poddle?"

"Not too bad," Bertie said. "But I have to take it easy."

"Coming out for baseball?"

"No," Bertie said regretfully. "It's not good enough for that."

"I'd suggest, Ted," Thornton said, "that you get one of the catching candidates to work with you. I don't mind your coming down, Bertie, but I'd rather you didn't take an active part, since you're not on the squad. You understand."

"Sure," Bertie said, biting his lip. "I won't get in the way. I just wanted to help out if I could."

"I appreciate it," Thornton said, turning away. "And any time you're in shape, you're welcome to try out for the team."

Bertie went back to the bench while Ted worked out with another catcher. He wanted to leave the field and go home, having been made to feel that he was unwanted, but there was nothing to do at home, and he loved this game. Even if he had to sit and watch, and do nothing, he wanted to be around.

Bertie was brooding a little over Thornton's words when the coach joined him on the bench. "Well, Bertie," Thornton said in a friendly voice, "how do they look to you?"

"Pretty good," Bertie said enviously. "Ted has a lot on the

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ball." Bertie hesitated and then went on. "I noticed one thing. Ted gives himself away when he's going to throw a slow ball."

"Yes? How?"

"Well, when he's got a fast one coming, he just lets it fly. But when the slow one is coming up, he acts as though he's going to throw a very fast ball. Every time he does that, I know the slow one is due."

"Have you noticed anything about the other players?"

"I don't want to sound like sour grapes . . ."

"You don't. These are good things to know."

"The second baseman," Bertie said seriously, "has a little habit I think might cause trouble. Just before he catches a ground ball, he looks up, to figure where he ought to throw it. If the ball takes a sudden bad bounce, he loses it. I think he ought to have his play figured before the ball is hit, and not take his eyes off it."

"I noticed that, too," Thornton said. "Anything else?"

Bertie mentioned a few other faults he had noticed while sitting on the bench. One batter took an awkward stance at the plate, and as a result, swung unevenly. An outfielder hung on to the ball too long after fielding it, and so on. When Bertie finished he was afraid he had talked too much, and regretted trying to sound off before the coach, who said nothing, but chewed gum reflectively.

"Coach . . ."

"What?"

"I . . . I don't want to be in the way," Bertie stammered, "and I can't do any playing, but I wonder if you'd mind if I came down to practice. I thought I could . . . kind of keep things picked up, and see the water bucket was filled. . . ."

"You don't have to."

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"I'd like to," Bertie said with a sudden rush of confidence. "I want to be part of the team . . . somehow. I wouldn't know what to do if I couldn't come around. I wouldn't be in the way, and it would help to keep things in order, wouldn't it?" Bertie looked hopefully at Thornton's face.

"We have plenty of kids for those jobs," Thornton said. "You don't have to do that."

"I'd like to." Bertie was disappointed. "I — I'd feel that I was doing something, not just looking. . . ."

"Bertie," Thornton said smiling, "You never give up, do you?"

"I guess not," Bertie answered, blushing.

"Look. I want you to come down here every day, and sit right on this bench and watch. I want you to do what you have been doing, and tell me what you see. You know, Bertie, a coach can't see everybody, and once some of these bad baseball habits get started, they can't be stopped. I want you to look for bad form, and write down what you see. I'll do the correcting, but I want you to help with the finding. How does that sound?"

"Sound," Bertie quavered. "Being your . . . assistant . . . ?"

"That's it."

"Oh boy," Bertie said, restraining an impulse to clap his hands. "Oh boy!"

"Don't let me down," Thornton smiled.

"I'll be here every day," Bertie promised. He sat back on the bench and shook his head in wonder. He'd found a place in baseball, bad foot and all. Of course, there wouldn't be any letter in it, but really, that didn't matter. If he did a good job, he'd be helping Heeble win. Bertie leaned forward and studied the players on the field. He'd do a good job. There . . . there

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was a fault right before his eyes. That infielder was wasting a motion in fielding and throwing. Bertie felt for a pencil and paper. Coach Poddle was at work!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BERTIE PODDLE sat at the counter, watching with appreciative eyes as Mr. Frubbler went through the ritual of concocting an order that began with vanilla ice cream, was followed by chocolate syrup, and was slowly built up to a peak containing marshmallow, crushed nuts and a touch of pineapple, with a cherry riding triumphantly on top.

"For you, Bertram," Mr. Frubbler said, placing the dish before Bertie. His hand still held the dish. "You are paying cash?"

"The full amount," Bertie said, and placed the coins before him.

Mr. Frubbler surrendered the ice cream and swept the coins into his hand. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Bertie hated to start eating and ruin the lovely dish before him. "Could I have a glass of water, please?"

Mr. Frubbler was filling a glass with water when Ted, Marcia, Wiggins, Hyacinth and several other people came in. They were talking about something in excited voices.

"Did yours come this morning?" Ted asked, sliding on to a stool beside Bertie.

"My what?" Bertie asked, his mouth full.

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"Your invitation to the Gold Letter Award Banquet."

Bertie's ice cream turned bitter in his mouth. "I don't know," he said. "I left home this morning before the mail came. I suppose it's there."

"Must be," Ted said. "We all got ours this morning. "Everybody who participated in school sports is invited, and the school pays the bill. Pretty good, huh?"

"Swell," Bertie said. "Any idea who's getting the award?"

"Wiggins, of course," Ted said. "It stands to reason. He's made a letter in almost every sport. He's Mr. Big when it comes to Heeble athletics."

"How are his grades?"

"Don't mean a thing. He's passed everything — I guess."

"I thought you would get it, Ted," Bertie said. "Your sport record is as good as Wiggins's, and your grades are good, too."

"Don't build me up," Ted laughed. "They're not announcing the winner until the banquet. I tried to find out from Wilbur, but he won't give. But my guess is Wiggins."

"Either one of you deserves it," Bertie said loyally. "You both ought to get one. When is the banquet?"

"Next Friday night."

"I'll be there," Bertie said. He finished his ice cream quickly and, after talking with his friends for a few minutes, he found an excuse to leave and hurried home.

Bertie ran into the house and went to the kitchen, where his mother was preparing lunch. "Any mail for me this morning?"

Mrs. Poddle looked up. "Were you expecting some?"

"Why . . . A horrible suspicion came into Bertie's mind. "Why . . . no, I was just wondering."

"I got the mail," she said. "There was a magazine, some

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advertisements, and a letter from your Aunt Perantha. She said. . . .”

“Nothing addressed to me?”

“No. Your aunt said . . .”

“Nothing from . . . the school . . . ?”

“Nothing at all. I thought I told you that. Your aunt says . . .”

Bertie got up and started out of the kitchen. “Bertram, I’m talking to you. It isn’t very polite to walk out like that. Your aunt says . . .”

Bertie turned back and dropped heavily into a kitchen chair. He heard his mother’s voice, but her words were a blur. What had Ted said? Yes, that everyone had received his invitation this morning. *Everyone*. The mail service was the same all over. If he didn’t have his, it meant they hadn’t sent him one. Well, he hadn’t made any team. He’d never been a full-fledged member of any squad. They’d just let him hang around because he wanted to. No reason to feel they had to send him an invitation to the banquet. They hadn’t asked him to hang around. He’d asked them.

But darn it, he’d tried so hard, the least they could have done was invite him to the banquet. They didn’t have to, but what was another plate? Didn’t they know how much it meant? Couldn’t they unbend a little? He’d helped Coach Thornton in baseball, the coach could have arranged for an invitation to be sent. Gosh, everyone else would be there. All the fellows . . .

Bertie was aware that his mother had asked him something. He saw her questioning eyes looking at him. “What do you think of that?” his mother asked.

Bertie managed a weak grin. “Why that’s fine,” he tried to say heartily. “Just fine.”

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"Fine that your Aunt Perantha fell and broke her arm? Bertram, what is the matter with you?"

"I'm sorry, mom," Bertie stammered, looking around wildly. "I thought you said . . ."

"What?"

"Something else. I thought she fell and didn't break her arm."

Mrs. Poddle shook her head as Bertie got up and walked out. That boy. Sometimes she didn't understand him at all. All that fuss about mail. Expecting a letter from some girl, probably. And at his age. She'd have to speak to Horace, and have him take Bertie aside for a good father and son talk.

Thoroughly crushed, Bertie went into the living room and threw himself on the couch. He lay looking up at the ceiling, thinking. This was the last straw. His life was ruined. He'd never go back to school again. Not Heeble, anyway. He was through with that outfit.

Bertie was too restless and miserable to stay in the house. He got up and went out, walking heavily, stunned and saddened. The whole world seemed gray and dark, and every sound was flat and discordant. The singing of birds was like a mass screech of derision, the honking of automobile horns was mocking, and meant for him. Bertie Poddle, fat, funny, failure.

What a time to see Wilbur! Yet, Wilbur was coming along the street with his familiar swinging stride, his hands in his pockets, his lock of hair bouncing over his forehead. Bertie felt like charging him, bowling him over, and beating him to a pulp against the pavement. All his rage, disappointment and humiliation seemed to center around Wilbur. Yet, when Wilbur spoke to him, Bertie stopped, and talked. He suddenly felt too leaden and worn-out to be angry.

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"Now don't ask me who won the Gold Letter," Wilbur charged him. "I haven't told anyone else, and I won't tell you."

"Aw, who cares?" Bertie said dispiritedly.

"Don't you?"

"Why should I? It doesn't mean anything to me."

"I can't believe it. A man without curiosity. Anyway, you'll find out Friday night."

"Maybe," Bertie said. "I'm not interested. I can wait until Saturday."

"It's being announced at the banquet."

"So I heard." Bertie wished Wilbur would shut up and go away.

"You don't sound very friendly this morning," Wilbur said.

"I don't feel friendly," Bertie snapped sullenly.

"I'm sorry we had the fight, Bertie," Wilbur said. "Let bygones be bygones. How about it?"

"Okay," Bertie said, still sullen.

"See you at the banquet?" Wilbur said after a moment of strained silence.

"Not me," Bertie answered, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Aren't you going?"

"I'm not in the habit of going where I'm not invited," Bertie said stiffly.

"Not invited! There must be some . . ." Bertie walked away while Wilbur was talking. Wilbur stood looking after him. "Well, I'll take care of that right now," Wilbur said to himself. He stared at Bertie's broad back, and grinned.

That afternoon, while Bertie was sprawled on the couch again, growling at Bart, the doorbell rang. Bart answered it. He was back in a moment. "Special Delivery for you, Bertie."

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Bertie stumped to the door and signed, taking the envelope. It was square and white, of good paper. He frowned. Why would he be getting a Special? With Bart trying to jump up and look, Bertie ripped open the envelope. Inside was an invitation to attend the Gold Letter Award Banquet.

"What is it?" Bart asked as Bertie returned to the couch.

"An invitation."

"To what?"

"The Gold Letter Award Banquet next Friday night."

"Can I go, too?" Bart asked hopefully.

"You can go instead," Bertie said angrily. "I'm not going."

Bart was aghast. "Not going?"

"No!" Bertie shook the letter furiously. "Everybody else got their invitations this morning, and I didn't. Then this comes by special delivery. There was only one person who knew I didn't get an invitation, and that's Wilbur Frost. He must have sent this. Well, I won't go. If they didn't think enough of me to send me a regular invitation, they needn't think they can make up for it this way. I know where I'm not wanted, and I'm not going. And I don't need Wilbur to do me any favors at all."

Bart retreated before the fury of Bertie's impassioned words, leaving Bertie alone to growl and mutter about his pride.

The week passed, and Bertie clung to his decision not to attend the banquet. Friday night he was at home, nervously biting his fingernails, a mass of conflicting doubts, but still determined not to go. He tried to cover his feelings by reading. Bart sat in a corner chair, looking intently at Bertie, and not understanding.

Mr. Poddle joined them. He walked in, turned off the radio without asking if anyone was listening, and prepared to mutter

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at the evening paper. He read it quietly for a while, then looked up at Bertie.

"Bertram. It says the Gold Letter Award Banquet takes place tonight. Is that true?"

"Yes," Bertie said weakly.

"Aren't you going?"

"No."

"Why not? See here, if that school thinks for one moment . . ."

"His invitation came late," Bart piped up. "He's sore because Wilbur Frost had it sent."

"Is that true, Bertam?" Mr. Poddle regarded Berie sternly.

"Well, if they wanted me there, I would have got my invitation when the others got theirs," Bertie said indignantly. "They don't have to do me any favors."

"Did it ever occur to you," Mr. Poddle said, "that in the confusion of making out the invitations, one or two people might have been over-looked at first, or their invitations temporarily misplaced? That happens all the time, you know."

Bertie stared dumbly at his father, the sharp teeth of doubt beginning to gnaw his resolution.

"Foolish pride," his father continued, "is one thing we can do without in this house. If a mistake was made with your invitation, that's no reason you should make a bigger mistake, make yourself miserable, insult your friends, miss out on a good time. . . ."

"Do you think so, Dad?" Bertie cried. "That I ought to go?"

"You ought to be there!" Mr. Poddle thundered. "Now, get a move on. Clean up, change your clothes and get out of here. I've been looking at your sad face for a week without knowing what was wrong with you. Your mother thought you were in love. Go on!"

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Bertie ran upstairs and set a new record in bathing and changing his clothes. He came down the steps knotting his tie, his shoe laces loose.

"Bertie," Bart cried desperately as Bertie came by. "Can I..."

"No!" Bertie howled, and was out of the door and hurrying up the street, trying to tie his shoes and run at the same time.

Bertie had minutes to spare when he arrived at the Heeble Hotel, where the banquet was being held. He was glad he had changed his mind. There were bright lights, and he could hear music, and the sound of happy voices. Faces were flushed and eyes were bright. It was gay and noisy, and wonderful.

Bertie went forward to the banquet room. As he started through the door, he was stopped by a long arm. "Your invitation, lad," said a familiar voice. Bertie looked up and paled. It was the policeman who had caught him trying to sneak into the professional football game last fall.

Bertie's hand went to his pocket and came away empty. "I — I must have left it in my other suit," Bertie stuttered. "I had one. I..."

The policeman squinted at him. "Where have I seen you before? Let me see, now. I never forget a face. You . . . you . . . Ah! The football game. You were the one who . . . still up to your old tricks, eh, lad? I'm sorry to see it. So young, and already well along the road to crime. Tryin' to sneak in here, now. Out you go!"

"But I'm invited!" Bertie howled, trying to free himself from the policeman's grasp. "I'm invited!"

The policeman took a firmer grip on Bertie's collar and was dragging him away when Coach Thornton came up. "What's the matter, officer?"

"Caught this one trying to sneak in without an invitation."

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"I have one," Bertie panted, his cheeks scarlet. "I forgot it at home."

"The boy is right, officer," Thornton said. "I sent it to him myself. I'll vouch for him."

"If you say so," the policeman replied dubiously. But he released Bertie, who stood close to the coach, and clung to his side until they were safely through the door.

"Thanks, Coach," Bertie said. "I really do have an invitation at home."

"I know," Thornton repeated. "I sent it."

"You . . . ?" Bertie's jaw dropped.

"Yes. I was checking the list Saturday morning, and discovered your name had been omitted by some oversight. So I sent it around by Special Delivery."

Bertie wasn't able to answer. What he had almost done! He closed his eyes, shaken.

Bertie's seat was at a table with his friends. They were all excited, but it didn't interfere with their appetites. But there was a general sigh of relief when the meal was over, and Coach Thornton stood up to make the award.

A hundred eyes looked around, filled with speculation. Most often, they rested on Wiggins, or Ted, and it was the general opinion that one of them would get it. The two boys tried to look nonchalant, and unconcerned, but all they succeeded in doing was to look even more uncomfortable. There was a hush as Coach Thornton began to speak.

"Tonight we are awarding the first Theodore F. Heeble Gold Letter. As you know, the award is based on a number of factors — participation in athletics, scholastic achievements, and general school spirit and what we call school citizenship.

"It was not easy to make our decision. A number of candi-

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dates were presented and discussed. Some of them had excellent athletic records, others had a finer balance of athletic and scholastic achievement.

"The winner was a candidate suggested by the student member of our Board, Wilbur Frost. A thorough examination of his record proved to our satisfaction that this one boy best lived up to the meaning of the Gold Letter.

"Our choice, which was unanimous, will come as a surprise to most of you. We have decided to award this first Gold Letter to a boy who is not naturally endowed with the physique of a star athlete, and who is not an outstanding scholar. But we are awarding it to a boy who demonstrated the finest school spirit, determination, and progress through hard work that we have ever seen. In athletics, our winner was not a star, but, in every case, he was a devoted member of the team for which he was a candidate. Personal glory was secondary with him, and service to the school was his first thought. And to serve the school and further its victories, he was willing to accept the humblest position on the squad, and yet work as hard as though he were the star.

"In scholarship, I am informed by the other members of the Board that by dint of hard work and concentration, he made more progress than they had thought him capable of. And so, tonight, we pay tribute not to a star performer, cheered to his victories, but to a student who has never won a letter or seen competition, but whose example of determination, and devotion to team play, has been an inspiration to all of us who have worked with him. I take pleasure in awarding the first Theodore F. Heeble Gold Letter to a dauntless fighter . . . Bertram Poddle!"

There was a nushed, shocked silence. Coach Thornton was

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smiling, holding up an H that gleamed golden in the light, and the Board members were smiling and applauding. Then a great roar of applause filled the room, and Wiggins and Ted were beating Bertie jubilantly on the back, while Marcia and Hyacinth smiled happily, but a little dazed.

The most confused and stunned person in the room was Bertie Poddle. He sat open-mouthed, staring at Coach Thornton as the Coach held up the golden H and waited for Bertie to claim it. "Well, Bertie," Thornton laughed when it was quiet. "Don't you want it?"

Bertie leaped to his feet amid a gale of laughter. He went forward blushing, his round face a mixture of happiness and embarrassment. When he accepted the letter, and shook Thornton's hand, the students yelled for a speech. Clutching the letter in his hand, Bertie turned to face them.

"I . . . I can't believe it," Bertie gasped, and waited for the new shout of laughter to subside. His throat was dry, and the room was a blur before his eyes. But when it was quiet again, he was in control of himself once more.

"I don't have to say what this means to me," he said, looking at the letter in his hand. "I never expected . . . I . . . all I ever hoped for was a chance to win a blue H. Once, last fall, I was going to quit the football team when I knew I couldn't make a letter. I told my father, and he told me that it didn't matter if you won a letter for yourself or not. The big thing, he said, was that the team won. He said it was like the Army. It wasn't only the medal winners who helped make victory possible, and that winning meant as much to the unknowns as it did to the headline heroes.

"Once I saw it that way, it didn't make much difference if I got my letter or not. I knew then that we can't all win letters

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and be on the first team, and be the kinds of players we'd like to be. But I found out that I could get as much fun out of sports as anyone else, even if I wasn't very good, as long as I got in and tried my best. And I was able to help the school, too."

Bertie paused for breath and looked fondly at his letter again.

"I don't suppose I ever will win a blue H," he said longingly, and wondered why they laughed. "But I'll keep trying as long as they'll let me come around. I wish . . . I wish there were more chances for ordinary fellows — for those of us who are a little too fat or too thin or too small for competition, to play football and baseball and games like that at our own speed. It makes it kind of hard when there's only the school team to try for. If you're not awfully good, you don't get to play, no matter how much you like the game. School teams are all right," Bertie said quickly, "but I wish there could be more chances for the fellows who can't make the big teams. I guess that's all I've got to say except . . . thanks."

When the banquet broke up, Bertie pushed his way through to Wilbur, who stood waiting for him with his hands in his pockets, the familiar smile on his face.

"Why did you give them my name?" Bertie asked, looking intently at Wilbur. "I didn't give you any reason to . . . I never got along . . ."

"Bertie," Wilbur replied, shaking his head, "At first I thought you were a pretty funny character. I still do, and I hope you won't mind if I continue to write about you — I can still whip you if you object. But I watched your progress all through the school year, and I want to hand it to you, Bertie. You don't know when you're licked. I saw it first when you were boxing with Wiggins, and then in track, and last of all in baseball."

"But we were always snarling at each other. . . ."

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"Our personal relations didn't have any place in my job on the Board, Bertie. Grant me that much."

Bertie stuck out his hand. "How about it, Wilbur?"

"Sure." Wilbur took his hand.

"Say, Wilbur . . ."

"What?"

"Some time when you're not busy, how about giving me a few pointers in boxing."

"So you can whip me?"

Bertie laughed and shook his head. "I'm going after the heavyweight spot next year. I think I can stay with Wiggins if I know a little more."

"Okay, Bertie."

Their conversation ended when Marcia pulled at Bertie's arm and said to come along to Frubbler's. He could have anything he wanted, it turned out, and Wiggins was footing the bill. Bertie went, and may have walked on the sidewalk, but all he could remember was how easy it felt to walk on air.



Bertie Poddle, a fat, pink-cheeked, guilty-looking boy with blue eyes and pale blonde hair, tip-toed toward the front door of his home, looked around, and slipped outside. As he grinned triumphantly, closing the door, a small boy with black hair and bright black eyes tapped Bertie on the back. "Where we going, Bertie?"

"We? No place. See here, Bart, you aren't going with me!"

Bart threw back his head, opened his mouth, and let out a screaming howl of protest.

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"Oh, all right," Bertie growled. "A fine thing when I can't leave the house without a little brother tagging along."

Bertie walked along the street with a jaunty bounce, heading for Frubbler's, where he knew he would find his friends, and where he would set Bart up to anything he wanted. Bertie glanced fondly at his little brother trotting along proudly beside him. Bart was all right. It was good to have him along.

Two or three blocks from home Bartholomew turned questioning eyes on Bertie, who was perspiring inside a heavy white sweater. "Why are you wearing that big sweater today?" Bart piped. "It's almost ninety in the shade."

Bertie looked down at the white sweater, and at the big golden H on the front. He pulled his stomach in and puffed out his chest a little more. "See here, Bart," he warned, "if you want to come along with me, just come along and keep quiet. If you don't like the way I dress, you can turn right around and go home. If you're ashamed to be seen with me . . ."

Bartholomew looked up with hero-worship shining in his black eyes. "I'll keep quiet, Bertie," he promised. "I like the way you dress." Bart crowded as close to Bertie as he could get, eyeing the golden H. "I like to be with you," Bart said fervently.

Bertie smiled, wiped his red face with a large white handkerchief, and felt his chest grow another inch.

"So rarely is a fat boy the hero of a story that it is good to welcome back Bertie Poddie."—*New York Herald Tribune Book Review*. "Bertie's story has humor, sensitivity and realism. It will bring entertainment and insight to boys."—*The New York Times Book Review*.

BERTIE TAKES CARE

By Henry Gregor Felsen

Author of *Bertie Comes Through*, etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY JANE TOAN

It was the Idiot's Delight (triple decker ice cream, chocolate sauce, whipped cream, bananas, nuts and cherries) at Frubbler's drug store that was Bertie's undoing. Minus quite a few pounds he might have been a camp counselor for the summer too, along with Ted Dale and Wiggins Hackenlooper, Heeble High's powerhouse fullback. As it was, no choice remained to Bertie but to stay in town and be trailed by his brother Bart who was nine and a terror.

However, Bertie made the best of his misfortune. He rounded up some of the town's unhappiest ragamuffins, organized a camp of his own, and before the summer was over had the satisfaction of seeing his team beat some of the snobbery and egotism out of the baseball nine at Camp Ijoboko.

Rollicking humor and real pathos combined in an outstanding story of achievement and good sportsmanship which all boys will enjoy.

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